

Lucas Ihlein interviewed by Ian Milliss

September 2011

IM Ok look what I thought we should do first off is this, in my interview there's stuff about Yeomans, and my original attempt to do this in the seventies, but we haven't talked about this new project. So give us a bit of a rundown on how it all came about; how you were approached and how you came to actually looking at this.

LI You mean in terms of working with you, as well as working with ACCA?

IM Well working with ACCA, really.

LI Yeah, ok. I can't really remember fully. Hannah approached me and said she was putting together this exhibition about the connections between conceptual art, first generation conceptual art and whatever's happening today. Her premise was that a lot of the stuff that's going on these days is operating within the legacy or slipstream of conceptual art. So her idea was to put together this exhibition that somehow made that connection. I suppose what she was trying to say was that a lot of the stuff that people are doing these days as contemporary art owes a lot to the space that was carved out by conceptual art in the 60's and 70's, but it's perhaps not acknowledged as much as it should be. I thought that was quite interesting and I guess there's lots of things that you could do with that. I'm interested in that for all sorts of different reasons, partly because my connection to conceptual art was always this kind of accidental process of discovering that whenever I did something as an artist, some smart-arse would come along and point out that it had been done before. And I'd be like, 'well how the hell am I supposed to know that?' So my education in conceptual art was, rather than learning it all from a curriculum-based learning, historical thing, it was more about doing something and then accidentally discovering that it had been done before. And then following that up, and then going, 'wow, this is really amazing stuff', and then building onto that in this haphazard way. Dipping back and forward into practice and history. For that reason I thought Hannah's idea could be an interesting thing to be involved in.

IM Which raises an interesting question, that you weren't aware of that stuff. There are two possibilities; one is the curriculum - why don't art school curriculums actually examine that stuff? I mean obviously they can't examine everything in detail, but was it that the stuff just wasn't taught? Or the other possibility, were you not interested in it at the time, until you did come across it?

LI I think it was one of those cases where your interest emerges slowly. You have to have a certain amount of understanding of what a thing is before you can actually articulate that a thing is an interest to you, do you know what I mean? You have to have been exposed to it. You and I have talked a bit about this before. My own high school art education was pretty much restricted to Heidelberg School plus Picasso and hermetic Cubism, and it went up to Futurism and got a bit confused around Dada and then that was the end of it, you know? So I didn't even really know this stuff existed to be interested in it. But I guess I had a basic underlying interest in cultural objects which drew attention to their own means of production. From the very beginning of my own creative practice, even in primary school, I would try to find ways to make interesting display and distribution methods for the kinds of projects that I did. So for example, instead of just handing in a school assignment about a particular planet in the solar system, I would make a kind of show bag like you'd find at the Easter Show with all sorts of objects in it, you know a different way of

experiencing a realm of information. So by the time I was studying art at university this kind of thing was – you know I was already sort of doing it. But I suppose it's only when you do it publicly that one of your teachers or peers or someone can say, 'hey that looks a bit like (...)' And it wasn't until second year or so at university that this sort of thing started to happen to me.

IM I think it's one of those things that you'll find looking at the career of an interesting artist, that virtually from their juvenilia right to the end, there's the same concerns in some weird sort of way; like the concerns are hard-wired in, they just come out in lots of different ways.

LI Yeah, you pretty much just make different versions of the same art work for your entire life, don't you?

IM Often very different, but the same underlying concerns, in some odd way.

LI The other side of things - I think what you were hinting at before - is that conceptual art was not as available, or as official, a history within the stream of contemporary art history...

IM And not only that! How much were you aware of "first-generation" conceptualism as opposed to second, third, or fourth-generation? Which in a sense is what we're up to now, because it's been more than forty, forty five years since the first clearly recognisable conceptual works; that's quite a long time. I'm just wondering how you would characterise that early stuff? You know, what's different about it than the later stuff?

LI Yeah I don't know. Maybe you could say that what characterises first-generation stuff is that it didn't have the benefit of being able to look at the history of first-generation conceptual art in order to do something different.

IM ...it had to make it up as it went along.

LI Some of the first stuff that I was exposed to was things like Ian Burn's mirror pieces, you know where they're progressively foggier? I was living in Perth at the time and a lot of us over there were really aware of the fact that Perth was regarded as this cultural backwater. Bits of major culture only trickled in occasionally. We were reading Terry Smith's essay *The Provincialism Problem* and thinking a lot about how, you know, if Australia was provincial compared to New York, what was Perth compared to Sydney? It all seemed very real to us at the time. This idea in Ian Burn's *1-6 glass / mirror piece* was that as information goes through these generational changes it diminishes in its integrity. Yet in that piece, and in his other pieces that were to do with photocopying, he seemed to be claiming that actually this wasn't necessarily a problem. This was something that you could grasp onto as an interesting phenomenon. You could make useful bits of culture in your own space and time out of these mis-heard transmissions. That was quite an empowering message to receive. Burn and Terry Smith, they were obviously wanting to critique the alternative, which was the slavish reproduction of things that you get from art magazines that are imported from overseas. And I think they were saying that the versions that Australian artists made were so bad, the copied versions were so bad that they actually became interesting in their own right.

IM The basic colonialist position is that you've got to copy the stuff from the centre correctly, whereas the misappropriation, I suppose you could call it, and misunderstandings carry real importance themselves, and often reflect the real nature of where you are. I think that's what he was hinting at...

LI Probably within that understanding is that the way you define 'the centre' is that the centre doesn't really have a broad awareness of what's happening outside of the centre. Whereas if you're in the peripheries or the margins or the provinces, you're acutely aware of what's going on in the centre, even though it might have a bit of a delay getting through. Being provincial can be a kind of hyper-awareness.

IM Personally, I had to make a choice at some point in my early twenties about whether to go overseas. I made a choice not to; I actually made a real choice to stay and work in Australia. I would argue that you can actually see the centre better from the edges. But you have to make stuff about where you are and you also have to make stuff about where you are in time, as well as geographically. That's my next question to you, which is - there's a lot of things you could have investigated in this context, of being asked to be in this exhibition; why would you have chosen this Yeomans thing? I mean it's not like the other things in the show, as we both know.

LI Well, to answer that in a roundabout way... I guess I've got another strand in my practice which deals with expanded cinema - I'm not sure if you know about all of that stuff that was done in the 60s and 70s...?

IM Yeah, yeah.

LI ...expanded cinema being this experimental cinema movement which involved a performative element in combination with experimental work with say 16mm film and stuff. I became really interested in that in the early 2000's, partly because it sounded really exciting on paper. But it was hard to access the works themselves. You can't just get them out of a video store, they have to be reconstructed in order for them to actually "be the work".

On the other hand, the interesting thing about them was that a lot of them are available as a set of artefacts, like a roll of film plus a set of instructions. So there is a possibility, if you get hold of those instructions and those artefacts - or even if you can reconstruct the artefacts - that you can cobble together that art work from the past, and experience it in its expanded form. So for about ten years I've been playing around with some of those things, and what that involved is often going back and finding artists who made work in the 60's and 70's and getting in touch with them. And the unexpected side-effect of all that is a kind of inter-generational connection, a series of oral history experiences.

The whole thing ends up being much more - well it's more than you bargained for. Originally I thought I just wanted to experience what a particular artwork was like, but you end up with this whole cultural history plus artefact plus reflections from the present. As well as all these time-based conundrums, like say if the work was made on 16mm film in 1971, what does it mean to work on that same medium now? Especially if the original artists have now moved on to working with digital stuff...

IM You can't experience any of that without creating a set of social relationships in the process.

LI That's right! Curators must do that all the time. They're not just collage artists who put together this artist with that artist, they also start to build relationships with those artists that they're working with. It's within that context that I also had in my mind over the last few years to do a project in collaboration with you. Before this, you and I haven't really had much in the way of conversations. We've corresponded a little bit through blog comments and stuff, but I was aware of your hovering around there.

Probably I think 2007 was the first time I started to think about working with you. I remember, Reuben Keehan invited me to be in an exhibition at Artspace and one of the things that I said to him, because you know, I don't often have hundreds of ideas for what to do for exhibitions like some artists, I said, 'I don't know, I wouldn't mind doing a project with Ian Milliss but I don't really know what'. I don't think I knew you well enough at the time to actually do that, and the deadline was looming so I ended up doing something else. But when this exhibition of Hannah's came up - by then you and I had had more conversations. It seemed to fit very clearly with the theme which is to do with early conceptual art versus contemporary legacies. So in some ways, as I think you've suggested

before, we are very literally responding to Hannah's theme for the exhibition, being the...

IM Yeah probably more than anybody else is, actually. Other than Agatha, I think Agatha is trying to explore that as well. The intergenerational connection between early conceptual art and its legacy.

LI I suppose that's the context of how I came up with this idea. The other thing of course is that you had been talking to us about the possibility of doing some prints on the Big Fag, and your unrealised Yeomans project was one of the...

IM ...things I'd mentioned, yeah.

LI ...you and I first started talking about it, but maybe you just mentioned it in one of those conversations about what you could print on the Big Fag, and you had all these...

IM ... I wanted to do a series of prints of things that didn't happen, yeah.

LI And that's obviously to me a really interesting idea to start from, which is about using the printing press to make souvenirs of things which have never really existed.

IM That never really happened at all.

LI The artwork becomes a kind of talking point, or a mnemonic. It's like a memory prompting device that causes you to have discussions and flesh the issue out a bit further than what you would have done if you didn't have that artefact, you know?

IM Yeah, indeed. I mean the other thing too, to just go back a little bit, is that when I was younger, or even when I was your age, the art world was a much smaller place than it is now and there really weren't those generational ghettos that there are now; and there really are some generational ghettos, you know? So from when I was about 17 or 18 I knew say, Bob Klippel really well, for instance, who by that stage was probably in his late 40's or 50's, and he remained a lifelong friend. So you could actually meet artists from whole different generations and styles and get to know them fairly well. I think that's a much harder thing to do now, on every level. Probably the people who suffer the most because of that are older artists, more than younger artists. You need other ideas floating around; you need to see what other people are thinking and you can miss out on all of that. I just wonder whether with this exhibition Hannah's is also poking at that a bit as well, that whole loss of generational connection?

LI You're probably right. I've had good experiences when I've tried to contact older artists from the expanded cinema world. They've usually been very keen to pursue that inter-generational connection. There's a sense of relief that somebody from the younger generation - especially when it's a non-institutional connection - there's a direct ancestry...

IM Well it's always gratifying to feel that you're remembered, but the other bit of it is that it actually gives you more energy. Because you can feel pretty lost and locked out, you know? Even if you're really successful you can still feel pretty isolated.

LI I suppose the other thing, just to dwell on it a bit longer, on this issue of how the whole project came about - because we haven't even got onto Yeomans yet! - but just to...

IM No, well that's my next question!

LI ...but just to stick with Milliss for a bit longer... It's like that comment that Wendy [Carlson] made - about how you were 'the biggest un-renovated house on the block'. I'm interested in these various artists in the history of conceptual art who made a decision to opt out. Like Lee Lozano who spent some years without art, and then there was the art strike by that Stuart guy, I can't remember what his name is now - Stuart Home. And Tehching Hsieh. And there was a talk given

by Lucy Lippard last year which was all about escape strategies - strategies for escaping the art world...

IM I thought that was actually really spot-on, that Lucy Lippard talk...

LI Yeah, but they all kind of eventually failed. Lippard for example talked about how it was a bit of a failure, she never managed to escape. The art world constantly expands itself to draw those people back in. It doesn't like losing members!

IM I see it in slightly different terms; it doesn't like being criticised, and the way to deal with that is simply to absorb the criticism. You know, just swallow it up and make it part of your rhetoric without acting on it. That's what happened to a lot of conceptual art, and that's how you ended up with a quite conservative second generation of conceptual art, which really didn't bother anyone. It fitted into the institutional framework quite nicely. But this raises the next issue too, which is that - I mean talking about the other things you could have investigated in this context - there are issues involved in this other than art. I'm thinking of issues like sustainability or climate change - political issues and stuff like that. I'm just wondering whether that also played a part in you picking this avenue for Hannah's show? I mean I know in recent times, that environmental stuff has been involved in quite a bit of your work.

LI Yeah well I guess the environmental audit at the MCA last year was the closest thing to that, as well as the TENDING garden project that I've been doing with Diego [Bonetto] down at Sydney College of the Arts. Both those projects are really strongly influenced by my exposure to permaculture, through Milkwood and the world that they've created.

IM But how did you come to that? There must have been a step that got you to that?

LI That's a good question. The permaculture thing is probably another example of what I was talking about before - about how I have exposure to these things after the fact, and then I discover that it was what I've been interested in all along. The same thing happened when I stumbled on relational aesthetics, you know in 2002 or whenever it was, it was like, 'oh my god, this guy's written a book which is about the kind of thing I've been doing for ages', you know?

IM Yeah that was my reaction to it, too, 'this guy's written a book about what I've been doing all my life'.

LI Yeah, and he even came up with a name for it, so that's terrific. The same sort of thing happened with permaculture. The logic structures or the systems within it are really appealing, they're intellectually satisfying. These principles around doing one thing and getting two outcomes, or one activity not just being useful for one thing but having these spin-offs or by-products which then turn out to be useful for other things. They lead towards this idea of a much more integrated system of living, which is what I've been searching around for in, both in art and in life, for ages. And here it was...

IM That is a really important comment, a lot of what we've been talking about in terms of the art aspect of this project is that this isn't just something for an art gallery, it's got other implications; we don't just do things in one way, we do things in several different sorts of ways, deal with the same information in several different ways. It fits into that sort of approach, doesn't it?

LI Yeah that's right, that's right.

IM It's obviously a very natural approach for you.

LI It's something I'm always aware of. Alarm bells always go off in my head when I see an interesting subject matter being transformed into an art work which I know is only going to be experienced within the art gallery context. My critical alarm bells go off and I think, 'oh that's a shame because imagine if...' It might be an artwork which is about boxing, and you think, 'well imagine if that

work was situated in a boxing community' rather than this dry gallery, and how it could interact within that world, you know?

IM That's like what I was saying about the importance of having different audiences; of recognising there are different audiences.

LI Yeah, so I suppose for a few years now I've been trying to develop a practice which can exist in different spaces simultaneously. Blogging's pretty useful for that although I feel like it's getting to the point where it's already a bit old-fashioned now.

IM It is, isn't it? To be cool you should be working on Twitter.

LI Yeah, yeah.

IM ...which is now almost in itself old fashioned.

LI I am getting to the point where I'm not sure what the next step is, in regard to all of that, but I'm not rushing into anything, I'm just thinking about it. But to come back to your point, I suppose you're right, that permaculture ethic or philosophy, when it did come along, really clicked with me. I suppose like a lot of people until that point I thought permaculture was just a kind of gardening method that involved being a bit messy with your gardening, but then it was a real surprise and pleasure to discover that it's not that - gardening's only a tiny little bit of permaculture. It's such an amazing, totalising system of thinking about the world without being closed or without shutting off the possibility of its own system learning new things.

IM In a sense the 'permaculture' bit of permaculture is really just one of its by-products. In the same sort of way that art works in the art world are actually just one of the by-products of cultural evolution, you know? The real issue is cultural evolution overall. Well there's a way in which permaculture fits into that perfectly, and the actual 'permaculture gardens' or whatever are just one of the many outcomes of a way of looking at the world and thinking about the world. And also it can equally apply to making art as you say. But that raises another issue too. Most people come out of art school, or most people who end up as artists have a very conventional sort of art practice - I mean, why didn't you?

LI I don't know. I'm not sure whether what you're saying is correct; I don't have enough awareness of what's going on in art schools to know whether what is coming out of them is very conventional, but I suppose if you define 'conventional' as what everybody does...

IM Well I suppose my idea of 'conventional' is that if it ends up in an art gallery, it's conventional.

LI Yeah, yeah I suppose so. Well I have no shortage of experience working with art galleries myself over the years. It's just - it was just that I, I don't know, I just always had that thing going on where they were these kinds of bounded social spaces that require you to cross the threshold, and for a lot of people who are not art-world people they can be quite intimidating. Ironically, especially when you consider that the sorts of experimental spaces that I've hung around a lot can be the most clubbish and intimidating of all! My Nanna doesn't have any problem stepping into the Art Gallery of New South Wales, but it would be hard to get her to step into a more radical artist-run space, and the irony of that is that that's where you're often likely to find work which is...

IM ...trying to resolve precisely that problem!

LI So I started trying to think about how to do stuff that didn't require that art gallery system at all. But the other thing of course is, coming to Sydney from Perth, as I did in 1996, it took me a few years before I kind of realised, 'this is just' - you know - 'the whole real estate system here is just terrible'. The artist-run gallery model based on real estate just doesn't work; it's so expensive and it's a bit like amateur sport. You know, if you're an amateur you have to pay to play sport but if you're a professional you get paid to play. And the art world is a

bit like that – if you're a young artist you have to pay exorbitant amounts of money proportional to your income to exhibit your work, which is basically just paying the rent on gallery spaces and I just kind of thought...

IM That's very interesting; I'd never thought of that because it wasn't like that for me when I was young. But yes, it changed after that time.

LI In the lead up to the Sydney Olympics in the late 90's it got very expensive to exhibit in artist-run spaces, and the alternative was to operate within the governmental sphere, kind of like the realm of funded galleries. At that time I wasn't able to just walk in the door and say, 'hey I've got an idea, will you support it?'. So all those kinds of feelings were floating around. I'm often like that, inventive things come about through a sense of disgruntlement at the status quo.

IM See, I really like this, because it's been said often that people are just 'painting theory' and it's often true and it's one of the things that annoys me about the art world, you know? I mean I've always thought that theory is what you do after practice, not before practice. You go out and you mess around with the world and then you draw some conclusions from that and then go and mess around with the world some more. That's what you're saying isn't it? Even when you knew nothing about conceptual art, but you went and did things and then someone said, 'oh well that's like this' and so you went and looked at it and then you went, 'oh', and went and did something else...

LI That's right! Another fantastic way of thinking about all this, that I discovered after the fact, which I really connected with, was by this guy called Donald Schön in a book called *The Reflective Practitioner*. He really codifies that process; he looks at professionals from all sorts of different fields and analyses the way that they behave in their day-to-day life. Schön recognises that what they do is essentially what you were just talking about – they do things and then they make discoveries...

IM And think about them.

LI ... then they go away and reflect and then they re-incorporate those reflections into their next moves. There's an evolving, spiralling process of action and reflection. And so that at any one moment, your next move, which seems to come out of nowhere, which seems like a total improvisation, is in fact the result of months or years of developing your own philosophy of practice.

IM So look, one of the implications of all this though is that you develop a practice which actually has some real world consequences, doesn't it? It's not actually meant just for the art world, it's meant for other audiences as well, but also it has a potential for real world consequences. How did you think about that? Did that just not occur to you at first? Is that in any way disturbing or problematic, or...?

LI Real world consequences... I think I've always been keen to make sure that my ambitions for real world consequences are relatively modest. I don't know why that is. Maybe because of, I've never been someone who – you know how you read some biographies of artists or film directors or whatever and they aim for the top of the tree, and they imagine that that's what they're going to be like? And they know that in order to make their dream film they're going to need a million dollars, so they work towards that? I've always been a bit the opposite. I really can't stand that idea of working towards some magical point in the future when I have enough resources to do what I need to do; I've always thought, 'well what...'

IM ...yeah, do it with what you've got now.

LI ...yeah, 'what can I make with what I've got now?' And that can be really empowering because it means that as an artist you can practice every single day no matter where you are or what you've got. On the other hand it can be a bit

limiting. Sometimes it IS necessary to have access to some particular resource, and so then it's just a case of getting wise enough to know when you need to be patient and work towards something longer-term. Even so I've always erred towards small resources rather than big. What that means is that my sense of having a larger effect in the world has always been fairly modest, and it's always started from the idea of having an effect on myself. The idea that having an effect on myself and my own life and my own desires will perhaps have a spill-over effect into the broader community or something. I've never really been interested in art that waves a flag as being political or you know, revolutionary in the sense that it's going to go out there and try and change things.

IM Well that's an interesting issue in terms of this particular work. Dealing with Yeomans really does mean dealing with real-world consequences in a way. It isn't going to change the world in a huge way, but it's tending towards that. There are other things you've done like the Redfern Squatspace bus tours, I mean they have serious political implications - in a low-level sort of way, but those low-level things can often snowball.

LI That's probably a good example - that project started from a sense of personal despair or desperation that as a small bunch of artists we weren't going to be able to have any impact on what was going on in Redfern when the Redfern Waterloo Authority was formed. So it really just was about trying to find out some more information about who might be affected by the changes that the government was going to bring in, and then the more people we talked to, the more we realised that the whole thing was enormous and was way beyond our capacity. So all we could really do - we couldn't really transform any of that into something coherent, so we just turned the activity that we'd already been engaged in - which was wandering around talking to people - into a semi-formal structure which became this bus tour. The interesting thing about that is that a lot of things that have happened as a result of that we probably don't even know about; people who came on the tour got in touch with people who spoke on the tour and formed other alliances. It empowered them in different ways that we don't know about - it just kind of, it gave them a foot in the door, into you know what seemed like quite closed community neighbourhood structures.

IM I find that really very impressive. One of the arguments I've always made about what I did was, to the best I could in any point in time, I tried to just find these little points in the culture where the little bit that I could do might actually swing things in some way or another, you know? I never had huge resources either and it was just, 'well what little thing can I do here which might be the leverage point where the whole thing can change in some way or another?' And especially if it was exactly that thing which set off a whole sequence of events which would then run far away from you, if you could begin something which has a life of its own. I think in that particular project with SquatSpace, you did that in a very neat and elegant sort of way, so I felt that was very impressive. And they were a very interesting use of the art world because rather than place things in the art world you simply used the art world as the entrance point, you know? You put up a sign saying, 'here, come on the bus tour'.

LI That's true, the gallery was the point that we left from rather than the destination. For me, some of that stuff connects up with what was going on in the early 70's. For instance, there's an artist who's still around, Stephen Willats, a British artist who would do projects in public housing estates. He'd get residents of these public housing estates to fill in these forms; he was obsessed with getting them to fill in forms, I don't know whether it was supposed to be a parody of the social security system or what, but he would get hundreds of these forms filled in and then display them on these pin-boards in the foyers of the apartment buildings themselves. So there was this idea of bypassing the art

gallery as the logical destination where everything ends up. Rather if people from the art world were interested in his stuff, they would have to make their way to these public housing estates and stand uncomfortably in the foyers to read about the residents.

IM ...and have exactly the sort of experiences that they probably try to avoid most of the time!

LI ...so sometimes I guess there's a bit of that going on there, you know? A wilful perversity about the art gallery as a kind of social environment.

IM This raises the issue of blogging again; blogging is really quite a major way of providing access to stuff without having to go through any institutional gatekeepers, which is really the way the art institutions function - you know, they're basically the gatekeepers, and blogging cuts around that, doesn't it? It goes around the edges.

LI Yeah I think so. You know how in the 90's people used to use the term 'multimedia'? Blogging is multimedia in the sense that it's a publication like a book, but you don't have to have any money to publish beautiful full-colour pictures in a blog. Whereas if you're publishing a book you constantly have to consider what your printing budget is... And with blogs, you can publish sound recordings and movies and all that sort of stuff. And it's like a book which has built-in correspondence, like the letters page of a newspaper. A combination of all of these other forms of communication media - you know it almost seems ridiculous to actually even say that these days, because it just seems "normal", but when I first came across blogging as a possibility in the early 2000's it was very exciting.

Before that I would usually make small zines or little you know, self-published books, and use them as a means of distributing poems, or information about the things I was involved in or whatever. And I really liked them because I didn't have to ask anybody, 'can I publish this?' or send it to an editor and wait for their reply. Like you said, it bypassed those cultural gatekeepers, so that's one aspect of zines and also blogging that's really great.

The funny thing now is that we're at a stage where there's a sort of irony to all this discussion. Because we're involved in this exhibition which is pitched at a fairly high-profile level, so that you know, we've become, we're almost like caricatures of ourselves. Like Andrea Fraser, you know the American conceptual artist - well, she must be second or third generation - who is known for this cultural - what is it? "institutional critique". But of course as someone doing institutional critique, nobody really knows about you, unless you're already on the inside, you know?

IM Right. To do institutional critique you need institutions!

LI Yeah, and to be accepted by them as an important voice, otherwise you're just an crazy outsider railing against the system...

IM ... that's what I meant by 'repressive tolerance'. They just incorporate you into their structure.

LI Well if you're lucky they do; there's plenty of examples of disgruntled people who never quite made it in the door!

IM Yeah, yeah.

LI - why don't you hear about them? Because you just don't, they just...

IM Yeah, yeah, well that was what I always used to say - they used to talk about "transgression" and about artists 'subverting institutions' and stuff like that. But all the artists they said it about were the ones who did no such thing. The ones who really attacked the system, they simply disappeared. But I do worry about exactly what you were saying because I hope we're not being self-delusional here - I get the feeling, or at least I hope, that we're on a bit of a cusp at this moment where finally we have reached the point where institutions can't

absorb everything - that in a sense what we're putting in this show is stuff which is about cultural evolution but it isn't art, and that's a real issue you know? Everything up to now could somehow, no matter what it was, could be accommodated as an 'art work' in the sense that Donald Brook says the institutional model of art can accommodate anything as art which is why it is impossible to effectively criticise it from within. Whereas we're talking here about putting in things which aren't art works, which no one can mistake for art works, we're not even pretending that they're art works in that conventional sense. Again, like with the SquatSpace bus tour, we're putting them in as pointers to something which actually exists outside. But is that self-delusional?

LI *Maybe it is. I mean I think the pointer itself - you know the arrow that's doing the pointing - is probably the art work. As the artist, you get a big pat on the back from the institution for making an elegant form of pointing...*

IM *Yeah, indeed. But to an extent, that's as true of a landscape painting as it is of the kind of thing we're doing, isn't it?*

LI *I guess so. But it still doesn't mean that the landscape that is signified by the landscape painting is in itself an artwork. I mean, think about Baruchello with his piece of land outside Rome. In his book *How to Imagine* he's talking about his piece of farmland as a kind of art work; perhaps what he means is that his process of working on that land is the art work. But either way when Diego went there last year, from what I could tell it wasn't as if people regarded that same piece of land as an art work. It was just a piece of land.*

IM *Well the interesting thing about Baruchello is that it isn't as if how he treated his land was extraordinarily unconventional in agricultural terms. Whereas with Yeomans you could argue that in a sense that what he's done with it is unconventional; I think it really is clear when you look at that aerial photo of Nevallan, that we're using in the print, that suddenly you're dealing with a way of managing and arranging a farm which is not quite what you're expecting. I think it really is clear in that overhead shot that this is laid out quite differently. This is something else.*

LI *One of the most interesting things I've found about from Yeomans' books, is this relationship between reading the land and knowing the land. When you say 'it's a radically different way of treating the land', it's because the standard way of treating the land might be to make a bunch of straight lines or a grid and call those the boxes that you work within, and go from there. Whereas what Yeomans is proposing - it's an embodied way of reading the land which takes into account a whole lot of pre-existing geographical, altitude and climactic and soil-related things.*

IM *Yeah, he blocks it out in terms of the way the water moves. And I think that's a very interesting thing too. To some extent farmers have always tried to do that, but not to the extreme that he does.*

LI *Yeomans writes a bit about the difference between farming and art himself in one of the chapters in *The Challenge of Landscape*...*

IM *Yeah, 'no artist has control over their materials'...*

LI *'No artist or artisan ever has such broad control of the medium through which he expresses his own character and personality as does the farmer or grazier in the control he can exercise over his land. The landman can create his own landscape, but the artist gives only his impression of it ...', and I mean that's true in both a positive and negative sense, isn't it? I mean if you're Yeomans, the control you're exercising over your land is not domination-based control, it's a kind of - it's almost a loving responsiveness to the land.*

IM *Well we're talking about Lao Tzu, aren't we? Softly, softly fitting in and working with it, rather than wrestling it. And the control comes from actually bowing to the land. And moving with it rather than banging your head against it,*

and I think that's a very different way of - look, to some extent that's in all farming, but Yeomans takes that to a really sophisticated extreme. I mean if you're going to put it in more Western terms, I think you can say that he makes farms work by 'value-adding', by using design, the real issue is the intellectual content of what he does, rather than massive capital investment or anything like that. It comes from simply understanding what's happening. So he uses something which costs nothing - i.e. intellect and understanding.

LI The other thing that I've really enjoyed about this project is this criss-crossing back and forth between Yeomans work as a practice of philosophy, and the philosophical premises of conceptual art. Some of the best conceptual art draws attention in quite a potent way to the conditions of being in the here-and-now, often within an art gallery context, because that was the default environment to do it. But you could say that Yeomans is doing the same thing - really paying attention to what it's like to be in the here and now - but not in a gallery, on a piece of land. It's a much more complex environment, if you're outside the white cube. And he has some great things to say about how the land responds to you: very positively or very negatively, but it always responds. If you make your move and the land doesn't like it, it's going to punish you. Which is great, it's really great in terms of thinking about feedback systems, systems thinking, you know?

IM *In a sense that brings me directly to the next question. There's two different futures I'd like you to speculate on here. One of them is climate change. You're about to become a parent so whether you like it or not, you're now extended a hundred years into the future, in a way that I'm not because I'm not a parent. That has to concern you, the way the world's going, and those feedback systems are obviously critical. Now where do you think, realistically that it's going? And secondly, where do you think art fits into that? And what role can artists play? How does this whole thing fit together here? I mean I can see it implied in what you've been saying, but...?*

LI There was some discussion about this last year at a symposium called *The Tipping Point*, at Performance Space. All the usual debates were raised about how scientists, although they've known for a long time about climate change, have failed because they weren't able to convince the public and governments and corporations that it was a serious enough threat to make them change their behaviour. The suggestion was that artists might have a role in coming in as a community of practitioners. That they could have a role in terms of being, I don't know... a public relations department for tackling climate change.

IM *That's a very prescriptive sort of way of looking at it though, isn't it? I don't think that's the way to go.*

LI No I don't think so either. I think artists aren't exempt from those more widespread feelings of despair about what to do.

IM *Expressing despair is not the worst thing to do.*

LI No, that's true.

IM *Well I often do.*

LI Yeah, but that kind of gets a bit tiring after a while...

IM *It certainly does.*

LI As a human being, in order to carry on you need to have some sense that your day-to-day activity has some greater meaning than just, you know, your own short term gratification. To feel like you're moving towards something bigger than yourself or more useful than just your own purpose. I don't really know the answer to that. I think part of my own method, or way of dealing with that is to try and tap into that part of myself which I regard as being ordinary, being an ordinary person. For example, when I did my environmental audit at the MCA last year, I deliberately began that project as a non-expert on climate change,

environmental auditing - I didn't know what kind of electricity systems or grids or...

IM ...it was a great illustration of exactly that sort of bewilderment but in a sense it was also a great illustration of losing innocence.

LI I think that's interesting that you say that, 'losing innocence'. That kind of reminds me of the Adam and Eve story...

IM Knowledge.

LI Yeah knowledge and the loss of innocence - which then results in a big calamity for them. Anyway I don't know where that particular story was leading. Possibly in the wrong direction. But I suppose my technique or method of starting as an ordinary guy comes from a performance tradition where you model the sort of behaviour that an ordinary person might go through in coming to terms with all of this really complex information. You almost dramatize it, you know? And in doing that, other people might look on and say, 'oh I'm an ordinary person too; it's interesting how he's doing it, how might I do it?' And that potentially is useful because we're bombarded with experts, and experts always have opinions but they're monolithic opinions because behind them they have this huge wealth of opaque research that you can never quite access, you can only access the outcomes of the research.

IM One of the arguments back in the 60's about the glorification of the artist was that being presented as a special type of creative person deprived other people of their creativity; and in a sense that's what you're saying, isn't it? That was also one of my arguments for trying to act as anonymously as possible. To just be like a normal person you know? Rather than to make out a big thing about the fact you were an artist. That's what you're arguing isn't it, in a sense?

LI Partly. I think there's pros and cons to that. At a certain point you have to embrace the fact that there are people in this world who have thrown themselves into developing special forms of knowledge and that knowledge is fantastically useful and the key is to form useful alliances with those kinds of folks. Strangely, it does get to the point where as a non-religious person you have to develop something called 'belief'. That can be intimidating because you think, 'well I've spent my whole life trying to get away from that idea and here I am saying, "yes I am a believer in this kind of science which I don't fully understand" ...

IM There's a big difference between 'belief' and 'faith' though.

LI Well what's the difference?

IM 'Faith' implies a lack of evidence, you know? 'Belief' implies evidence even if you don't understand it I think. 'Faith' is saying, 'there may be no evidence but you should believe it anyway'. But I think recognising that there is evidence for things is a different issue. I also had to come to a recognition that you couldn't just pretend that people don't have specialist knowledge and skills and talents and natural ability to do things that you can't do. That was what the Builders Labourers taught me. These guys, some of these guys were brilliant in ways that I could never be brilliant, you know? And that was very impressive. Firstly you couldn't pretend just because you were an artist that you were better than them, but secondly you couldn't pretend that there aren't people who are special.

LI I suppose to contradict that movement in the 60's to take away the authority of the artist in order that everybody could be an artist... there does come a point where you can perhaps feel empowered to grant yourself some authority that might prove useful, you know? Rather than constantly self-effacing...

IM Or at least making the effort, you know? You can admit to yourself that you are a bit different because at least you're making an effort.

LI That brings me to this idea. It's in Yeomans and it's also in say, in permaculture principles as practiced by Milkwood. Which is... Yeomans, criticised the American movement of soil conservation and how that was picked up in Australia... During the whole Oklahoma dustbowl disaster in America, there was this movement towards soil conservation. It was the idea that soil took thousands of years to build up, and there was nothing you really could do to help it, so whatever you had you should just try and preserve it. It was essentially a conservative attitude towards soil. And obviously it was better than you know, the sort of thing that...

IM *...than an irresponsible destruction of it...*

LI ...yeah, that would result in erosion. But Yeomans says, 'well that's fine, but what we need to be doing is not just preserving it, but proactively building up the soil'. A lot of the stuff that we hear now about climate change is about minimising impact, you know, 'Product A has 50% less impact on the environment than Product B'. Well obviously that's good, you should be trying, but on the other hand if you consider things over a thousand year life cycle...

IM *It's still just as bad. I mean it's essentially like drowning slowly rather than drowning quickly.*

LI Right. It's a question about time scales as much as anything. Similarly, I remember Nick [Ritar] from Milkwood, when I first went along to some of his permaculture classes, asking that question: 'what kind of life do I want to have?', in the face of this kind of massive climatic change? And he was saying, 'well one option is I can wear a hair shirt and whip myself and live this incredibly frugal life'. But for him it was a fundamental philosophical question about what it is to be human, and he said, 'that's not really what it is to be human; what it is to be human is to desire a super-abundant range of experiences that are rich and fulfilling', you know? So how can we think about achieving that in a way that is not only less-damaging to the environment, but which is *actively positive* for the environment? That's a key question to try and get our heads around, and those guys out at Milkwood in Mudgee have really set about trying to tackle that question through their own lives - which is a model that others can think about.

IM *They're approaching this, not just as farmers who are managing their farming practices, but as people who have a whole different set of knowledges as well, as artists, which means they can promote and they know how to use media and they know how to deal with a whole range of other things. If we're talking about where art might go, that's a better model than seeing it as just a sort of PR mechanism. What they're doing is about adapting this whole range of practices, both art practices and farming practices, and using media as part of that as well. I think that's very interesting.*

LI I think the integrated media system is the key. On one hand you and I have been critiquing the idea of art as "the PR department of the revolution"; on the other hand most artists I would say operate more like a fruit tree, continually producing products and relying on some other external force to do the marketing and distribution. Whereas for me the most interesting practice combines the two; it's like a kind of productivity which has its own built-in system of distribution and public relations and so on, as an integral part of the artwork itself.

IM *I suppose I should say at this point, 'what haven't I asked you?' Because I probably didn't ask you any of the things you really wanted to say.*

LI Not really, no I think you've covered heaps of interesting stuff there. We probably didn't talk as much about Yeomans as much as we could have, but sometime in the future we could have a more in-depth discussion about Yeomans himself which could kind of round things out, you know the triangle could be...

IM *Yeah, indeed. And once you start talking about Yeomans I think you also start to incorporate all those other people he influenced. Like I was saying, the*

interesting thing is when you just start things off and away they go, and they have all other sorts of consequences way beyond. Yeomans' practice triggered off all sorts of other things way beyond the stuff he was directly involved in. There's the stuff that his children did, but then there's also people like Stuart Hill and a whole range of other people. There are people like Darren Doherty and Ben Falloon, who are working on the straight farming end of it but there are people like Stuart Hill who are working on the much wider social implications of it in other ways, and how it fits into a whole way about how the world works and how do you change it to deal with things like climate change and other social problems.

LI That's what's so fascinating about him. You read these books of his - even this catalogue from the 70's which I scanned the cover of the other day - it's a catalogue he made to try and sell farm machinery parts, right? But you get to page four - it's amazing I've got it here, you get to page four or whatever page it is, towards the back, and he slips in this radical stuff about food politics; incredible political rhetoric that he slips into this farm machinery brochure. Food politics and what farmers should be doing: 'the fate of the future of mankind is as much in the hands of the farm of today and tomorrow as it was when the hunting and gathering of nature's bounty by early man was of necessity superseded by farming'. I mean he has this fantastically old-testament way of writing, almost a kind of...

IM ... slight messianic tendencies, yeah.

LI Yeah, yeah, and I really like that about him. Dry farm machinery salesman, and evangelist in one. As you say, Stuart Hill extrapolates from Yeomans, but it's all there in Yeomans to be extrapolated from, isn't it?

IM *I think that's what struck me about him really early on. I'm not someone who's ever been looking for messiahs or anything, but reading his stuff I thought, 'ok this is someone who appears to be doing one thing' - which is designing farms - 'but on the other hand he's seeing this in its entire social and political context'. Which for me was great because I was trying to see art in its entire social and political context too. So you know I could identify with what he was trying to do. He was trying to take his activity and see what its broader implications were. And not only that, he set up The Keyline Foundation which he tried to actually lodge right in the heart of the establishment. That list of people he enlisted into the board of trustees - you may not have realised, but they are real establishment figures. And so he was trying to get the thing really, really embedded in its social context so that it would succeed and continue to succeed. And it's very interesting that they managed to shake him loose again, given how hard he worked at it. In the end I suppose in a sense he couldn't tackle capitalism; it was too big for him, there was money to be made in all the other things like chemical farming and stuff like that and he couldn't defeat that no matter how much he tried to line up political and social forces on his side. But he was aware of it; he did try and do that - that's an interesting thing to try.*

LI To the point of setting up his own publishing company - someone who believes so strongly in what he's doing that he's prepared to publish his own books; with all of what that implies, which is that you're some kind of voice in the wilderness...

IM *Yeah and it's interesting because they don't on the whole read as sort of hoky self-published cranky-old-man sort of books, they have a much more real basis than that; they are more scientifically based in their ideas, quality design and printing.*

LI Maybe it would be good, it could be interesting if the opportunity arises at some point to bring together four or five people around the country who are enthusiastic about Yeomans and have a little...

IM Have them all talk about it.

LI ...a Yeomans discussion kind of thing.

IM Yeah well indeed, that's a great idea actually. Again, we keep coming up with different ways of coming back at this, you know? Whether it's bus tours or whether it's seminars and one of the interesting things about that is that the supposed art works, the prints we're exhibiting, are only one very small part of this range of different things.

LI Yeah.