

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA ART MUSEUM

# COMMON SENSE

John Bartley  
Ian Bettinson  
Bill Brown  
Robert Eadie  
Vivienne Ferguson  
Merrick Fry  
Claire Hodgkinson  
Jan King  
Alan Lawson  
Allan Mitelman  
Julie Savage  
Ken Whisson

7 March - 6 April 1991

The University of South Australia  
**Art Museum** would like to thank the  
following Galleries for the loan of work.

Garry Anderson Gallery (Allan Mitelman);  
Irving Galleries (Alan Lawson); King Street  
Gallery on Burton (Robert Eadie and  
Vivienne Ferguson); Legge Gallery  
(John Bartley); Macquarie Galleries  
(Bill Brown); Sylvester Studios (Julie  
Savage); Syme Dodson Gallery (Merrick  
Fry); and Watters Gallery (Ian Bettinson  
and Ken Whisson).

South Australia



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# COMMON SENSE

I need not traverse earth and sky to discover a wondrous object woven of contrasts, of infinite greatness and littleness, of intense gloom and amazing brightness, capable at once of exciting pity, admiration, terror, contempt. I have only to look at myself.

de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

The suggestion that 'common sense' has not entirely vanished from the microcosm where art is made and sold will probably sound no less unrealistic to its residents than to its visitors. But the placement of an exhibition of contemporary art under the aegis of this category is neither nostalgic nor haphazard. It aims at suggesting two basic verities. Firstly that the public sensibility has not entirely been numbed out of existence by the drone of the mass media. Secondly that it is through a moment of sensuous satisfaction that the works constitute themselves as appearances. A simple conviction underlies this curatorial attempt: 'good art' makes us feel in a way which makes us think. More precisely, it can mirror back to us our condition, changing as we change and making us feel what it actually means to be human.

It is not the thesis of 'the innocent eye' which is suggested here. In an environment shaped by an ever more invisible technology, nothing assures us that what we see has real existence and the difficulty of knowing what visual communality remains operative in the arts can in no way be eluded by a wishful gasp of the mind. Nevertheless, it is with great clarity that the sensation of being lost in the deep of this electronic mirage coincides with the most paradoxical certainty: 'a meeting with the self consists precisely in a pure state of being lost' (Ortega Y Gasset). Lost, that is to say, precisely where we happen to be, or more exactly, where we happen to be ourselves. Likewise the dissolution of all ethnic, regional or national traditions situates us in the space of an indefinite interrogation. No inherited wisdom informs our response to the most banal vicissitudes and, in the absence of canonical rules, ethical norms or any such pre-established criteria, most aspects of our intellectual artistic and everyday life can only be understood on an individual basis.

In its attempt to resist the unavoidability of this subjectivism, modernist art has kept finding itself caught in a dilemma. Either it withers away into a critique of its own circumstances, or else it drifts into the limbos of a pseudo-transcendence. It either loses its form or its content, and in both cases its integrity disappears. Furthermore the fading of its religious or academic references makes its status a problem: art tends to become simultaneously impossible and easy. Easy as the playful exercise of a right, and impossible since in the absence of a common language it can no longer be experienced as self-evident.



It was partly to solve this difficulty that early vindicators of Pop Art argued that artists do in fact have a vernacular to work with, or a *terrain d'entente* with the public, which is that of mass-produced urban culture. And for the last three decades this assumption has legitimized the cool witticism which succeeded the emotionalism of abstract expressionist gestures. Irony, impermanence and a mostly metaphorical concern for linguistic theory were to be all that was needed to ridicule the claims of the isolated genius and solve the enigma of the everyday. But this still fashionable pretence is no longer credible, and it must be asked whether it was the desire to tear away the bourgeois masks which prompted the merging of all art-forms into the aesthetics of the mass-media, or whether it was just a massive imaginative subservience.

When Marcel Duchamp launched his offensive against such tales of by-gone time as the artist's freedom to act and the worth of the aesthetic object, he did it with superb aplomb and marvellous inventiveness. Yet as the moral strength of iconoclastic modernism recedes, it becomes apparent that neither its strategy nor its gestures have ever told us what it feels like to be living through the present moment. Instead, the fear of being duped by the complexity of social structures is constantly woven into an aesthetic of indifference which endorses an ever more complete political apathy. With the complicity of various state cultural agencies, so-called advanced art parodies business and the reified taste it imposes can only do further damage to perception and judgement. Rumour has it that those two faculties have been declared *passées* by the diagnosis of the 'human sciences.' But the anaemic features of the works which take their cue from such nihilistic premises provide evidence in favour of a return to moral categories in art and individuated expression.

Finally such a disparate collection of objects and images as the one here assembled could just as easily be described as a statement of aesthetic preference. In our commerce with works of art, as in our contacts with other people, some appeal to us by a kind of mysterious affinity, arousing warmth for no particular cause. Each of them belongs to a sphere where it makes little sense to remain armed with a disembodied rationality. Serene or passionate, ambiguous or erotic, the attention which such works, or such beings, command becomes synonymous with beauty. And since the meaning of our encounter with them is but an expression of this attention, we ought perhaps to dispense with the ideology that everyone's equal right to artistic creation implies that all creative acts are of equal value. There are no solid criteria according to which a judgement of taste can be passed and then validated once and for all. Yet the quality of our attention in the presence of certain works of art and their retentiveness in the spirit suggests that a choice has been made. It may not have been deliberate; it remains indicative of the vital hierarchies according to which our values are formed.

Jacques Delaruelle  
September 1990

Exhibition dates: October 3 - November 17, 1990.

Artists included in this exhibition:

John Bartley

(courtesy Legge Gallery)

Ian Bettinson

(courtesy Watters Gallery)

Bill Brown

(courtesy Macquarie Galleries)

Vivienne Ferguson

(courtesy King Street Gallery)

Merrick Fry

(courtesy Syme Dodson Gallery)

Jan King

(courtesy the artist)

Allan Lawson

(courtesy Irving Galleries)

Allan Mitelman

(courtesy Garry Anderson Gallery)

Ari Purhonen

(courtesy Mori Gallery)

Victor Sellu

(courtesy Syme Dodson Gallery)

Ken Whisson

(courtesy Watters Gallery)

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