Bernard Smith and Robert Hughes: a critical dialogue

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Introduction

Bernard Smith (1916-2011) and Robert Hughes (1938-2012) were giants of Australian art history of the twentieth century. Both, however, followed very different career paths. Smith's reputation is largely confined to his homeland, where he is referred to admiringly as 'the father of Australian art history'.[1] Hughes, conversely, left Australia at an early age, to escape a country he regarded as provincial and isolated. Once dubbed 'the world's most famous art critic', Hughes found fame as an international art writer and media presenter.[2] It is hard to nominate two personalities more unalike than Smith and Hughes. Indeed, both represented two very different approaches to art history; whereas Smith's readership was primarily academic and local, Hughes's audience was popular and international. There was, however, a considerable amount of exchange between the two. This paper explores the origins and development of the public dialogue between Smith and Hughes, in which both writers engaged in open debate in areas of common interest. As will be seen, this conversation unfolded in the pages of published sources, especially reviews and books, as opposed to private correspondence. Key topics of debate included abstract art and modernism; provincialism and internationalism; and most importantly the vexed issue of Australian cultural isolation, which was defined in terms of Australian art and its relationship to European art history (or, as Smith termed it, 'Renaissance tradition').

Hughes and Smith first locked horns in 1961, when Hughes (a little-known 'undergraduate' art critic from Sydney) was commissioned to write the catalogue essay for *Recent Australian Painting*, a landmark exhibition shown at the London Whitechapel Gallery. An ensuing exchange between both writers continued intermittently for more than four decades. This discourse was characterised by acrimony and bitterness, as well as moments of conciliation and mutual respect. When contesting issues of common interest, Smith and Hughes played to their natural strengths. Smith was dominant in the field of art history, while Hughes had the upper hand in art criticism, especially contemporary art criticism. Each, however, encroached upon the other's area of expertise: Smith wrote art criticism and masterminded the Antipodean Exhibition of 1959, while Hughes expanded his range to include art-historical surveys; his book, *The Art of Australia*, was critically

[1] Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel's owl: the life of Bernard Smith*, Sydney: Power Publications, 2016, 2.
[2] Robert S Boynton, 'The lives of Robert Hughes', *The New Yorker*, vol. 73, no. 11, 12 May 1997, 44.

acclaimed when finally published in 1970. Conflict between Smith and Hughes was greatest in areas where their respective spheres of authority overlapped. Although these tensions receded after 1964, when Hughes left Australia, they did not end. Hughes's expatriation was an ongoing point of difference. Smith regarded Hughes as a brilliant (though erratic) art critic who had turned his back on Australia in pursuit of international recognition. Hughes considered Smith to be Australia's pre-eminent art historian. However, when it came to matters of judgement, he accused Smith of being blinded by bias. For Hughes, Smith was an angry Marxist who put ideology before aesthetics.

'A scenario of threatening trivialization': the origins of the Smith-Hughes dialogue

Robert Hughes was an active player in the Australian art world for a relatively short period. He began writing art criticism in 1958 and left Australia in 1964, living abroad until his death in 2012. Hughes wrote *The Art of Australia* in 1963, but its publication was delayed until 1970. It was to be the culmination of his Australian years. Although Hughes retained an interest in the art of his homeland, his contact with the Australian art world was sporadic.[3] As a world-famous expatriate based in New York and art critic for *Time Magazine*, the affairs of the metropolitan centre dominated his attention. The Antipodean Manifesto, however, remained a constant topic of contention for Hughes.[4] The Manifesto, a diatribe composed by Smith for the Antipodeans Exhibition of 1959, was frequently resurrected whenever he was called upon to recount his formative years in Australia.[5] Hughes wrote in his memoir:

> Since Australian artists have never tended to seek group identity in clubs or "movements," the very existence of this document had a certain significance, but its meaning mostly lay in its misunderstandings. Drafted by Bernard Smith, the not yet quite ex-Marxist professor of art history at Melbourne, with some prodding by the painter and potter David Boyd, it set forth a scenario of threatening trivialization.[6]

[3] Patricia Anderson, *Robert Hughes: the Australian years*, Sydney: Pandora Press, 2009.
[4] The Antipodeans was the name of a group exhibition comprising seven artists: Charles Blackman, John Brack, Arthur Boyd, David Boyd, John Perceval, Clifton Pugh, all from Melbourne, and Robert Dickerson of Sydney. As the intellectual leader of the group, Bernard Smith contributed to the 'Antipodean Manifesto', a collective statement published in the exhibition catalogue. The exhibition was held 4 – 21 August 1959 at the Victorian Art Society Gallery in East Melbourne. The Antipodeans adopted a defensive position: to make a stand on behalf of figurative art against the ascendency of non-figurative (abstract) art. The Manifesto created a furore, especially in Sydney, where it was interpreted as a provocation. The group disbanded after their first exhibition.
[5] Geoffrey Dutton, *The innovators: the Sydney alternatives in the rise of modern art, literature and ideas*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1986.
[6] Robert Hughes, *Things I didn't know: a memoir*, North Sydney: Vintage, 2006, 231.

Although the Manifesto was an important catalyst for Hughes, he was not the opponent Smith had in mind when he penned his challenging defence of figurative painting. In 1959, Hughes was largely unknown in Australian art circles. He was an undergraduate student at Sydney University who drew cartoons and wrote art criticism for a local paper, the *Sydney Observer*. Smith, conversely, was an established mid-career academic at the University of Melbourne and a lecturer in art history. Hughes's reputation as the *enfant terrible* of Australian art was confirmed in 1961, when he was commissioned by Bryan Robertson, director of the London Whitechapel Gallery, to write the catalogue introduction for the exhibition *Recent Australian Painting*. Hughes had just turned twenty-three. As Hughes recalled in his memoir, the Whitechapel essay was the 'first long, serious piece I had ever published outside Australia'.[7] This essay, accompanied by pieces by Robertson and Kenneth Clark, was a breakthrough. Hughes dabbled in painting and had two of his pictures included in the show, but it was his written contribution that caught the attention of British critics. The catalogue essay was read by John Lane, of Penguin Books, who was sufficiently impressed to commission *The Art of Australia* from Hughes.

With a pithy style and sharp turn of phrase, Hughes's reviews championed the younger generation of Sydney modernist painters. Undaunted by established reputations, his irreverent reviews of highly-regarded artists, including 'culture heroes' like William Dobell, were especially provocative. Hughes had never studied art and had just started to write for *The Nation*, a periodical with a national circulation, when he was invited to contribute to the Whitechapel catalogue. Despite being far better qualified to comment on Australian painting, Smith was overlooked in favour of Hughes for this prestigious task. As the ringleader of the Antipodeans Exhibition, Smith was disqualified, at least officially, from participating in the Whitechapel venture. This group exhibition of mostly Melbourne painters gained notoriety in Sydney. A polemical essay printed in the catalogue, 'The Antipodean Manifesto', was the brainchild of Smith. It called for a concerted 'defence of the image' to oppose the rising dominance of abstract art, which according to its signatories threatened to usher in a period of 'iconoclasm' and the reduction of painting to 'silent decoration'.

> Today we believe, like so many others, that the existence of painting as an independent art is in danger. Today *tachistes*, action painters, geometric abstractionists, abstract expressionists and their innumerable band of camp followers threaten to benumb the intellect and wit of art with their bland and pretentious mysteries.[8]

The Manifesto was an ambitious philosophical tract. The social obligations of the artist were among the loftier causes it espoused, including 'a right and a duty to

[7] Hughes, *Things I didn't know*, 266.

[8] Bernard Smith, *The death of the artist as hero: essays in history and culture*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988, 194. This paper quotes from 'The Antipodean Manifesto' reprinted in *The death of the artist as hero*. The Manifesto was originally published as a preface in the catalogue produced for the Antipodeans Exhibition in August 1959.

draw upon our experience both of society and nature in Australia for the materials of our art'.[9] The importance of myth, or more specifically the indivisible connection between figurative art and the process of myth-making, was arguably its most enigmatic contention. Myth, says the Manifesto, 'is a continuous social activity,' for it is in the 'growth and transformation of its myths' that 'a society achieves its own sense of identity'.[10] The Antipodean Manifesto must be viewed as a document of its time. In the late-1950s and early-1960s, mythic themes had become a preoccupation of Australian art. Starting with Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly series in the 1940s, it was fashionable for Australian artists to combine formal elements of modern painting with images and subjects from local history and legend. 'Voss in paint' was a disparaging term coined by Hughes to describe the contemporary fascination with Australian literary and folkloric material. The vision of the tragic-heroic explorer in Patrick White's novel *Voss*, published in 1957, was popular with Australian painters, providing a 'private goldmine' of readymade myths to plunder.[11] The myth-making role of the artist, as vaguely championed in the Manifesto, was therefore destined to be challenged by Hughes, who dismissed this type of 'generalised cliché-thinking' as 'critical *kitsch* for aesthetic tourists'.[12]

The Whitechapel and Antipodeans exhibitions share a complicated history. This backstory has been extensively covered elsewhere.[13] But suffice it to say, Smith had ambitions to exhibit the Antipodeans in London at the Whitechapel Gallery, where the cause promoted by the Manifesto could reach an international audience. Robertson, however, was not sympathetic to the Antipodean polemic, especially its stance against abstract art. *Recent Australian Painting* was therefore conceived as an alternative exhibition, one which aspired to be broadly representative of contemporary Australian painting, encompassing both 'figurative' and 'abstract' tendencies. Robertson, who visited Australia to select paintings for the show, wanted to assemble a collection that was national in coverage, which would transcend Sydney-Melbourne rivalry. This was necessary because the Antipodean Manifesto had labelled Sydney as the centre of modish abstract painting in Australia: 'And yet wherever we look, New York, Paris, London, San Francisco or Sydney, we see young artists dazzled by the luxurious pageantry and colour of non-figuration'.[14]

As the principal author of the Manifesto, Smith was too partisan to be entrusted with the Whitechapel catalogue. Thus, Robertson chose Hughes. And yet, the commotion caused by the Antipodean Manifesto might have blown over had a more diplomatic or mollifying writer been selected. Although the Antipodean painters were included in Robertson's exhibition, alongside the so-called Sydney

[9] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 195.
[10] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 195.
[11] Robert Hughes, 'Voss in paint', *Nation*, 25 February 1961, 24.
[12] Robert Hughes, *Australian painting today: a survey of the past ten years*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1963, unnumbered page.
[13] See for example: Simon Pierse, *Australian art and artists in London, 1950-1965: an antipodean summer*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012; Christopher Heathcote, *A quiet revolution: the rise of Australian art 1946-1968*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1995.
[14] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 194.

abstractionists, Hughes could not refrain from taking aim at the Manifesto and Bernard Smith. The confrontational posture and rhetoric of the Manifesto was evidently calculated to elicit a response. But Hughes responded in spades. The Antipodeans were characterised as a reactionary national (or nationalist) element. Hughes wrote:

> Recently, however, an "opposition group" was formed in Melbourne under the leadership of the distinguished art historian, Bernard Smith. His programmatic intent was clear. Australia, he argued, lacks a tradition of art but possesses strong *social* traditions. It has acquired its own myths, heroes and white man's folklore. If the artist, then, is to function as an effective social unit his art must reflect this and draw inspiration from it. The painter must be a mythagogue, making articulate the dreams and beliefs half-submerged in the national consciousness. This, he proceeded, cannot be well done by non-figurative art, since it is, "incapable of communicating" except on a basic level. He therefore entered an appeal for figurative art, bolstered by a demand for "The Image".[15]

Hughes continued to sharpen his criticism of the Manifesto in pieces written immediately after the Whitechapel essay. A feisty chapter on Australian painting was written for Peter Coleman's book *Australian Civilization*, published in 1962. This chapter was intended for a general readership and was possibly the first time these issues were broached outside the realm of Australian art. Without naming Smith, this essay allowed Hughes to frame the issues raised by the Manifesto in his own terms. Thus, according to Hughes, the Antipodeans represented a false dichotomy in Australian painting, in which aesthetic differences were simplistically explained as regional differences: 'At first glance, Australian art seems split by an unbridgeable gulf between the Melbourne realists and Sydney non-figuratives, with no Geneva in between'.[16] In Hughes's opinion, there was no actual schism in Australian painting. This supposed conflict wilfully ignored the mutual understanding that existed between artists. He quoted Bryan Robertson's observation in the Whitechapel catalogue that, 'whether abstract or semi-figurative, a general pull towards metaphysical abstraction now informs nearly all Australian art'. In essence, Australian painters had the same concerns and preoccupations as painters overseas.

A new catalogue essay was written by Hughes for *Australian Painting Today*, a touring exhibition arranged by the Queensland Art Gallery in 1963. This was an opportunity to yet again reject the bipolarisation of Australian art, which had encouraged 'Australians to think of their art as the document of a battle between abstract and figurative, the former centred in Sydney and the latter in Melbourne'.[17] Although renewing his criticism of the Antipodean project, Hughes had also

[15] Robert Hughes, *Recent Australian painting, 1961: Whitechapel Gallery, London, June-July 1961*, London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1961, 18-19 (emphasis original).
[16] Robert Hughes, 'Painting', in Peter Coleman, ed., *Australian civilization: a symposium*, Melbourne: Cheshire, 1962, 135.
[17] Hughes, *Australian painting today*, unnumbered page.

refocused his critique. The Antipodean painters were largely absolved of responsibility; indeed, he believed they were naïve to have attached their names to the Manifesto and should not be blamed for its ideological and rhetorical excesses. 'Australian painters,' he wrote, 'do not tend to congregate on the common ground of a shared idea. When they do attempt some kind of group statement, the expressed theory – as in the Antipodean Manifesto of 1959 – is generally naive and ill-shared'.[18] For Hughes, the arguments raised by the Manifesto were purely academic, concocted by an intellectual who was using artists to promote his own ideological agenda. The supposed tension between figuration and non-figuration was overinflated, if not totally invented. In his Whitechapel essay, Hughes had accused Smith of pursuing a programmatic line against 'non-figurative' painting. Now in a thinly veiled swipe at Smith, the 'reactionary critic' behind the Manifesto was accused of dividing Australian painting into two 'programmatic' extremes:

> The two programmatic extremes, social realism on the one hand and constructivism on the other, are dead issues in Australia today. We have no 'pure' abstract painters who work directly in the footsteps of Mondriaan (sic) and Nicholson; nor has illusionism survived. Despite the efforts of reactionary critics to set abstraction and figuration fighting like two cocks in a pit, the two not only coexist but modify one another.[19]

Smith on the 'myth' of isolation

It did not take long for Smith to respond to the Whitechapel exhibition. An opportunity arose in 1961, when he presented two lectures at the University of Queensland. The first lecture, 'The Myth of Isolation', was published in *Australian Painting Today*.[20] Smith expressed his satisfaction with the exhibition selected by Robertson. But he found fault with the catalogue introduction. Smith was riled by a statement by Hughes, in which it was asserted that Australian art had developed in a state of isolation from 'the Renascence tradition'. Hughes had written in his catalogue essay:

> What pressures, then, have formed Australian sensibility? The first that springs to mind is our complete isolation from the Renascence tradition, and, parallel with that, a similar isolation from most of what happens now in world art. It is possible that all civilized men in this country are, more or less, the progeny of the Renascence. That is rather cold comfort in Australia; if it is so, we have never seen our father.[21]

Smith immediately pounced on these comments. He had found a point of contention with which to rebuke Hughes, and on a topic about which he had

[18] Hughes, *Australian painting today*, unnumbered page.
[19] Hughes, *Australian painting today*, unnumbered page.
[20] Bernard Smith, *Australian painting today*, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1962. This paper quotes from 'The Myth of Isolation' reprinted in *The death of the artist as hero*.
[21] Hughes, *Recent Australian painting*, 13.

considerable expertise. It was preposterous, Smith argued, to suggest that Australian art had developed independently of its European origins and in ignorance of the legacy of the 'Renaissance tradition'. For Smith, Hughes's foolhardy comments showed an ignorance of Australian art and its cultural heritage. Savouring the opportunity, he was primed to give the fledgling critic an art history lesson. 'The Myth of Isolation' is undoubtedly one of Smith's finest essays.[22] It was also Smith's first exchange with his young adversary. Smith portrayed Hughes in condescending terms, as an 'architectural student from Sydney University who manages to combine some cartooning for the press, some painting, and a good deal of art criticism into a busy undergraduate life'.[23]

Smith systematically outlined his counterarguments against Hughes. Unlike Hughes, who had failed to explain exactly what he meant by isolation, Smith was careful to draw a distinction between isolation and *isolationism*. To his detriment, this was a subtle yet important difference that Hughes had neglected to clarify. Far from being isolated from 'Renaissance tradition,' Smith argued the opposite was the case: Australian art was an outpost of pictorial values instituted by this tradition. Smith described the principal Renaissance categories as 'the portrait and the landscape, and that important mixed category, the landscape with figures'.[24] These fundamental genres remained sacrosanct in Australian painting, long after they had been discarded by the European and American avant-gardes in favour of informal and subjective experimentation. 'Australian art', says Smith, 'has always been highly conservative in its movement and growth, and testifies to a survival of

[22] 'The Myth of Isolation' was the first of two lectures given as the John Murtagh Macrossan Memorial Lectures in Brisbane in 1961. It was essentially an essay on the concept of isolation and the impact of distance on Australian art. As an essay, 'The Myth of Isolation' rightfully belongs to a discourse bigger than art history. In the 1960s, Australian historians from a variety of fields grappled with similar themes, namely, the implications of distance and isolation as factors shaping the Australian experience. The most influential contribution to this discourse was Geoffrey Blainey's book, *The tyranny of distance: how distance shaped Australia's history*, Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966. Smith and Blainey reached similar conclusions: i.e., remoteness from European civilisation did not necessarily equate to isolation from European civilisation. Similarities between Smith and Blainey are noted by Peter Beilharz in his essay, 'Bernard Smith: The Quality of Marxism', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 114, no. 1, 2013, 94-102. Beilharz's remarks on Smith and Blainey are worth quoting at length: "Among his [Blainey's] many works, and likely better known for its title than for its message, is *The Tyranny of Distance* (1966). This is an extraordinary work in its own right, not least because it manages to enliven what is in fact a transport history as a key optic on white Australian life. For the colonies and cities that went to make up Australia first had to be connected, by traffic literal as well as cultural. Modern Australian history was therefore also the history of its transport technologies, their uptake and transformation. The Blainey thesis is brilliant. It does not, contrary to popular sensibility, suggest that the 'essence' of Australia consists in its being far away from the centres. What it implies, rather, is that 'Australia' is constituted by the traffic in between the cities and regions and other maritime regions. In this its themes are directly aligned or at least sympathetic with those of Bernard Smith." (p. 100).

[23] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 220.

[24] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 226.

Renaissance tradition'.[25] Isolationism, on the other hand, was tantamount to a reactionary ideology. Smith never denied that isolationism was a factor affecting Australian art. In the interwar decades, it was upheld by a generation of ageing artists, whose collective authority was equivalent to an artistic establishment. As Smith put it, isolationism was enforced to protect Australian art from new and foreign influences.

> During this period [the interwar decades] Australian art was indeed isolated, not from Renaissance tradition, but from contemporary art and thought in Europe. It was not so much isolation however but *isolationism* which operated, a conscious endeavour on the part of the Establishment to cut Australian art off from the influence of the contemporary movement.[26]

Thus, instead of being isolated from Renaissance tradition, Smith viewed Australian art as a bastion of these conventions. As he recalled from personal experience, 'the artists and critics who fought the crucial battle for the recognition of contemporary art here inherited a situation in which Renaissance tradition was entrenched'.[27] Although this tradition had hardened into 'a debased and degraded' form of academicism, its presence and influence was conspicuous in Australian art history.

> You may call it a debased and degraded tradition or a fine one according to your taste, but it was certainly there: perspective and tonal illusionism taught by Hall and Meldrum in their influential schools in Melbourne; and the Renaissance categories, portraiture, landscape, and landscape with figures remained intact.[28]

In the 1940s, the 'Establishment' could no longer withstand the 'revitalizing effects of the modern movement'. However, although contemporary artists rejected many of the tenets of academic tradition, the new generation retained the essential Renaissance categories of landscape and mixed landscape with figures. Indeed, Smith argued, 'it was within these very categories that the most significant achievements of Australian painting during the 1940s and most of the 1950s was to be realized'.[29] The need to preserve these categories provided the impetus for the Antipodean Exhibition and its defence of the 'image'. For this reason, Smith always maintained that the figurative idiom he defended belonged to a Western tradition of picture making. But instead of letting the matter rest, Smith continued to push his point, arguing, 'it was not until the years 1956-57 that the last vestiges of Renaissance tradition began to disappear in the experimental work of a group of Sydney painters influenced by the more informal types of post-war abstraction'.[30]

[25] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 228.
[26] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 226. Emphasis original.
[27] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 227.
[28] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 227.
[29] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 227.
[30] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 227.

This was a reference to John Olsen, William Rose, Eric Smith and John Passmore, whose group exhibition in 1956, Direction 1, was labelled Abstract Expressionist.[31] Thus, according to Smith, it was international abstraction that threatened to finally extinguish the Renaissance tradition in Australian painting, which had survived in the landscape and figurative categories.

Not to be outdone, Hughes responded immediately to Smith's arguments. He had evidently read 'The Myth of Isolation' soon after it was published. Although not naming Smith, Hughes's comments are transparent enough. Smith was 'the critic' he had in mind when he wrote:

> One critic has gone so far as to claim, as a reason for the vitality of local painting, its preservation of the Renaissance tradition through its categories – figure in landscape, portrait, and so forth. This is not easily defensible, since these categories are only a frame in which art happens, and have little to do with the vision that makes the painting.[32]

Hughes wanted to show that he was also capable of using art history to support his arguments. Where Smith had mentioned Max Meldrum, the Melbourne painter and teacher, as a staunch practitioner of Renaissance values, Hughes responded with his own take on Meldrum and his place in art history.

> Meldrum passionately admired Velasquez, and strove to retain Velasquez' absolutely objective approach to form and colour. Yet it could not be claimed that a tradition flows between Velasquez and Meldrum, for Meldrum added little of significance to Velasquez's discoveries.[33]

According to Hughes, 'tradition is building, not borrowing.' Yet however valid this point may have been, it was immediately negated by a cursory and vague comment about Australia and its European colonial origins. 'Besides', Hughes went on to say in the same piece, 'Australia's history militates against a preservation of Renaissance values: the First Fleet landed here nearly two centuries after the Renaissance declined, when its robust humanism had given way to the fragile and less important pursuit of the ideal landscape and the picturesque scene'.[34] Whether intended or not, Hughes was now contradicting himself as well as tacitly agreeing with Smith.

Although highly opinionated and quarrelsome, the young Robert Hughes was not unreasonable. As will be seen, he possessed a capacity for self-correction and revision. When revisiting this topic in 1963, Hughes had ceded ground to Smith. He was now acknowledging the continuity of Renaissance categories as features of Australian painting:

[31] The Direction 1 exhibition also included the sculptor Robert Klippel. The exhibition was held at the Macquarie Galleries in Sydney in December 1956. A contemporary review was written by Paul Haefliger, 'Exhibition of work by five leading artists', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 December 1956, 2.
[32] Hughes, 'Painting', 137.
[33] Hughes, 'Painting', 137-38.
[34] Hughes, 'Painting', 138.

> For Australians have so long been lamenting their lack of a tradition of the old that the chance of a tradition of the new hasn't yet struck them. And so painters are, to some extent, suspended. They have retained various Renaissance categories – figure-painting and landscape – but tend to use these as a mask for other preoccupations.[35]

But this reversal was not intended as a gesture of capitulation. Hughes was now using Smith's arguments to his own advantage. For according to Hughes, the Sydney abstractionists also worked within a general tradition of landscape painting and image-making. As he put it, Australian abstract artists were 'wary of pressing their conclusions too far' and would often 'familiarise their images and make them more easily accessible with titles like *Landscape Image IV, Waterhole*'.[36] Contrary to Smith's claims, the modern Sydney painters had never renounced the general principles of pictorial representation. Moreover, they continued to work within the broad categories of the Renaissance tradition. Hughes held the view that abstraction in Australia was not an autonomous or painterly end in itself, but rather a different mode of visual experience. In the case of Direction 1, 'it showed that these experiences (the shared image, between Olsen and Passmore, was Sydney Harbour) could be best projected through abstraction'.[37] The Direction 1 exhibition was therefore not the advent of Abstract Expressionism in Australia, as its detractors and supporters had supposed. These painters, says Hughes, had 'fallen victim to endless semantic confusions'. Hughes would hold Smith responsible for promulgating these misunderstandings.

Hughes on isolation(ism)

In his Whitechapel essay, Hughes used the theme of isolation to describe and criticise the adverse circumstances under which Australian painters had struggled to create works of art. In this regard, his understanding of 'isolation' had some similarities with Smith's ideological critique of isolationism. Robertson, however, interpreted isolation quite differently. Whereas Hughes viewed isolation as a negative factor, a symptom of Australia's geographical remoteness and cultural philistinism, British critics were encouraged see it as a positive attribute of Australian art.[38] Australian painters, according to Robertson, were inspired by a combination of nativist, spatial and environmental attributes unique to their

[35] Hughes, *Australian painting today*, unnumbered page.
[36] Hughes, *Australian painting today*, unnumbered page.
[37] Hughes, *Australian painting today*, unnumbered page.
[38] For example, see Michel Strauss, 'London,' *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 103, no. 700, July 1961, 326-327. In his review, Strauss focused on nativist and nationalist attributes: 'The deep consciousness of the existence of aboriginal folklore and of stories told of the legendary exploits of the pioneering white men exerts a strong influence on almost all the painters. […] There is a wide range of styles, evidence of distant derivations from New York and Paris, but the majority are far more profoundly affected by the Australian landscape. Here, too, there is an Image: man standing alone in an absolutely limitless and lonely panorama of desert, mountain, sky, and sun.'

country.[39] He repeated Hughes's assertion that 'the Renaissance tradition is utterly remote from them'.[40] The idealisation of 'Australian' cultural characteristics enabled British critics to frame Australian painting in terms familiar to a primitivist discourse.[41] Smith objected to this interpretation on the grounds that it perpetuated a patronising and Eurocentric view of Australian painting. On the Whitechapel catalogue and its false assumption that Australian art had developed in ignorance of Renaissance tradition, Smith protested: 'It was of course the most utter nonsense, but the kind of nonsense Europeans would love to hear. Australian art, Robertson explained, possessed the uncouth vitality of innocence; it was adorable exotica, the art of noble savages'.[42]

However, while this 'primitivist' trope might have influenced certain British perceptions of Australian painting, it was not Hughes's intention to construe isolation as a positive determinant. For Hughes, who styled himself as an urbane and cosmopolitan critic, unsophistication was not a quality of Australian art he was naturally inclined to endorse. Indeed, he viewed crude 'Australianism' as a sign of isolation and backwardness. Thus, ironically, Hughes saw Smith and the Antipodeans as stalwarts of these local tendencies, as a cultural rearguard who, with their reactionary Manifesto, were stubbornly resisting international developments.

Hughes's remark about Australia's 'complete isolation from the Renaissance tradition' was so demonstrably wrong it was likely meant as a deliberate overstatement, as an offhand comment made for rhetorical effect. Hughes's Whitechapel essay, and other writings from this period, contained a broader political message. Hughes was not only an outspoken critic of the Australian art establishment. He was also campaigning for a cause that was steadily gaining momentum in post-war Australian society; namely, support for public investment in art and culture and the need for professional stewardship in this area. A month before *Recent Australian Painting* opened in London in June 1961, *The Bulletin*

[39] Robertson's impressions of Australian art were printed in his catalogue preface. Many of his observations were framed to emphasise the exotic qualities of Australian painting: 'The imagery itself, cut off from our European environment, is highly inventive and has one unifying factor: an unremitting sense of the drama of the isolated moment […] Much of the instinctive exuberance and spontaneity of Australian painting comes from a natural plastic sense fed by the sun and the climate, like a harsher, more lurid and more tropical version of the Mediterranean counties […] Australian artists feel a special bond with the aboriginal art of their country for it is the nearest thing they have to a tradition close at hand.'

[40] Bryan Robertson, *Recent Australian painting, 1961: Whitechapel Gallery, London, June-July 1961*, London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1961, 10.

[41] A tradition of European thought, dating from the eighteenth century, has juxtaposed *culture* with *civilisation*; in this construct, idealised cultures are favourably contrasted with homogenised, and often artificial, civilisations. The literature on this topic is vast. An overview can be found in the classic study by Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process: sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. See Part One, 'On the Sociogenesis of the Concept of "Civilization" and "Culture". For a more recent interpretation, See chapter one in Terry Eagleton, *Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

[42] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 211. 'The truth about the Antipodeans' was originally delivered as a lecture at the University of Melbourne in 1984.

magazine in Sydney ran a story about Hal Missingham, the director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Missingham had just returned from a fact-finding mission abroad, where he had undertaken a survey of art galleries and museums; at the time, there was a proposal to build a new State gallery in Sydney. *The Bulletin* reported:

> Hal Missingham stepped from his plane at Mascot [airport] last week after a world trip of 100 art galleries which has convinced him that he was the director of one of the worst of them. He reported that even the galleries in the smaller towns in the United States are ahead of Sydney's National Art Gallery.[43]

It is not a coincidence that these remarks coincided with the opening of the Whitechapel exhibition. As revealed by Simon Pierse, large sections of Hughes's essay were deleted from the version printed in the catalogue. As a matter of diplomacy, Robertson censored sections that were deemed critical of government policy and public officials, including Robert Menzies, the prime minister of Australia.[44] The dilapidation of the Sydney gallery was symptomatic of the broader failure of cultural governance in Australia. Hughes's 'isolation' comments belonged to a wide-ranging critique of Australian art officialdom. This critique was focussed on two key areas, the first of which was the poor level of public funding for Australia's State galleries, the institutions responsible for the aesthetic education of the populace. The second point concerned the narrow collection policies of these institutions, which were heavily biased towards British and Australian art, especially the 'national' landscape school. Hughes complained there were no comprehensive collections of European old master paintings in Australian public collections, and very few examples of international modern art. Without these collections, it was extremely difficult for Australian artists to learn about their heritage (that is, the 'Renaissance tradition'). Hence, says Hughes, 'it was (and is) impossible for a stay-at-home Australian to see any number of significant works of art done in Europe between 700 BC and 1800 AD'.[45] This was a point he often repeated; for example, 'No Australian can see an adequate cross-section of art done between 700 B.C. and A.D. 1800 unless he travels'.[46]

Hughes held two institutions accountable for the maladministration of art in Australia: The Commonwealth Art Advisory Board (CAAB), a federal government body responsible for official exhibitions, and the longstanding system of trustees, which controlled acquisitions in Australia's State galleries. At the time of the Whitechapel exhibition, the CAAB was busy organising its own authorised exhibition of Australian painting to be shown at the Tate Gallery.[47] Hughes's

[43] 'ART: Flare-up in the Art War', *The Bulletin*, vol. 82, no. 4240, 17 May 1961, 22.
[44] Pierse, *Australian art and artists in London*, 110-111.
[45] Hughes, *Recent Australian painting*, 14.
[46] Hughes, 'Painting', 136.
[47] Clive Turnbull and Daniel Thomas, *Antipodean vision: Australian painting, colonial, impressionist, contemporary*, Melbourne: Cheshire, 1962. For an account of the formation, presentation, and reception of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board's exhibition at the

contemptuous assessment of this body was among the extracts that Robertson had erased from the Whitechapel catalogue. On the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, Hughes remarked: 'much of the blame for the present isolation of Australian art can be laid at the door of this singular body'.[48] When it came to the State galleries, chronic underfunding was compounded by a colonial-era system of administration that prioritised amateurism over professionalism. The key points of this criticism were outlined in a piece written in the months after the Whitechapel essay. The Sate galleries, says Hughes, 'all still labour under a grotesque law, which provides that the Trustees of each gallery be solely empowered to approve what is bought'. He went on to say, 'since most of the Trustees are appointed for their previous eminence in some field other than art – law, commerce, medicine, engineering, politics or society portraiture – chaos repeatedly supervenes, buying policies are lotteries, and a continual state of tension exists between the professional staff and the Trustees'.[49] Unlike Hal Missingham, the frustrated director of the Sydney gallery, Hughes could speak his mind on these matters without fear of retribution. He hoped, 'eventually, this idiotic system may be replaced with something more streamlined and efficient, but the time does not seem to be yet'.[50] Hughes's remarks were inspired by a modern, and essentially technocratic, faith in the role of enlightened public administration. Like other internationalists and progressives, he would welcome the funding and reforms initiated by the Whitlam Labor government in 1972.[51]

Thus, 'isolation' was a consequence of ignorance and negligence as much as geography. The public institutions entrusted to oversee the advancement of the visual arts in Australia were blamed for failing to fulfil their civic and aesthetic obligations. For Hughes, isolation could only be overcome by exposure to tangible and original works of art. Reproductions and second-hand knowledge were no substitute for the authentic experience gained from exhibitions and collections. Australian artists, and therefore Australian art, suffered the consequences of this isolation:

> Painters in Australia thus wanted to be influenced, but could not see a wide enough cross-section of work to digest the influence fully. The immediate danger was, and still is, that a half-assimilated influence can be worse than no outside stimulus at all. It is hard to weed out the lesson from the plagiarism.[52]

Tate Gallery, see Sarah Scott, 'Art, Cold War Diplomacy and Commonwealth: Australian and Canadian Art at the Tate Gallery 1962–1964', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2017, 487-502.

[48] Hughes quoted in Pierse, *Australian art and artists in London*, 111.

[49] Hughes, 'Painting', 143-144.

[50] Hughes, 'Painting', 144.

[51] Robert Hughes, 'At Last, the Canberra Collection', *TIME Magazine*, vol. 120, No. 21, 15 November 1982, 114; Lindsay Barrett, *The Prime Minister's Christmas card: Blue Poles and cultural politics in the Whitlam era*, Sydney: Power Publications, 2001. Hughes admired James Mollison, the foundation director of the National Gallery of Australia, and defended the purchase of Jackson Pollock's painting 'Blue Poles' for the national collection in Canberra.

[52] Hughes, *Recent Australian painting*, 16.

In his Whitechapel essay, Hughes cited the *Herald Exhibition* of French and British Contemporary Art, which toured Australia in 1939. This travelling exhibition, privately organised by the press magnate Keith Murdoch, presented the first (and only) serious challenge to isolation. It was the first time that most Australian artists had seen actual works by Picasso, Matisse and other modern masters. This event, says Hughes, 'caused an explosion, and decisively influenced the later course of Australian art'. He added, 'it induced in the younger artists who had not been to Europe a craving for more'.[53] However, 'a gap in the curtain opened and promptly shut'. The recalcitrant and reactionary officials of Australian art refused to endorse this venture. And because there were no comparable follow-up exhibitions to build on its impact, knowledge of contemporary international art stagnated and declined in Australia. For Hughes, the Antipodean exhibition was a direct result of this failure. He would therefore turn the isolationist argument against Smith.

> Consequently, Australian museums did not and could not inform their public about what had been going on for the last half century in Europe and America in terms of abstract art, and the result was the lame controversy that surrounded the so-called Antipodean Manifesto in 1959.[54]

The real targets of Hughes's criticism were essentially the same 'establishment' forces that Smith identified in his critique of isolationism. However, Hughes made the mistake of turning isolation into a qualified virtue. Isolation, he argued, had been a bad thing. It distorted the perspectives of overseas art and narrowed cultural experience in Australia. But, he added, 'at least one good thing has come from this misfortune'. Because 'they have no tradition readily available to profit from' and 'neither can the same tradition oppress them by sheer weight', Australian artists 'are thrown back on their own resources'. Thus, 'they have to make a cultural pattern, which is, under the circumstances of isolation, a more stimulating and productive task than adding to one. The exhilarating sense of starting from scratch exists here on a far deeper level than in Europe'.[55]

Smith's response to the Whitechapel exhibition had focussed on this single flawed point. Hughes always upheld his criticism of Australian art officialdom and its deleterious effect on Australia's cultural development. But he regretted his attempt to make the best of a bad situation; thus, he later admitted, there was nothing 'stimulating and productive' about isolation. In mature age, when reflecting on the Whitechapel catalogue essay, Hughes conceded:

> Rereading it, I cannot say that I am very proud of it – only that it was okay for a twenty-three-year-old. In it I made the error of trying to turn Australia's inadequate contact with the currents of contemporary art, and the poverty of collections that nominally represented European traditions, into some kind of virtue or even an advantage, as though they had forced an

[53] Hughes, *Recent Australian painting*, 16-17.
[54] Hughes, *Things I didn't know*, 231.
[55] Hughes, *Recent Australian painting*, 14.

> inventiveness from Australian artists that they might not otherwise have had. This, I came to realize – partly because it was sternly pointed out to me by Bernard Smith and other critics – was nonsense. Ignorance is never a spur to creativity (only the desire to overcome it is), and an inadequate grasp of traditions is not necessarily a step toward transcending them.[56]

Hughes on Smith: remarks concerning Smith the critic

Hughes reviewed Smith's new book, *Australian Painting*, for the *London Magazine* in late 1963.[57] It was the culmination of his bitter retorts to Smith in the aftermath of the Whitechapel exhibition. It anticipated the approach that Hughes would adopt in *The Art of Australia*. He would defer to Smith's seniority and experience as an art historian, but would attack Smith's taste and judgement when matters turned to contemporary art. In other words, Hughes had formed the view that Smith should stick to writing art history and leave contemporary art criticism to those who understood it. Hughes praised the early chapters of *Australian Painting*: 'Flawed as the later chapters are, *Australian Painting* is, up to 1939, a well-balanced, beautifully articulated and most informative book'.[58] But after 1939, Hughes goes on to say, '*Australian Painting* becomes uneven', the 'balance of its judgements slips' and the 'thorough scholarship declines'.[59] As Smith's narrative drew closer to contemporary events, Hughes's review grew more critical of the book (and Smith). The most derisive remarks were kept for the final chapter, 'Figurative and Non-Figurative', which covered the decade 1950-1960. Hughes pulled no punches when denouncing Smith's account of this period:

> I am told that Dr Smith originally intended to finish his survey at 1950. Alas, he did not. Coming into the home stretch, he shuts his eyes, drops the reins, whacks in the spurs and thunders along yelling shrill and garbled catchcries. It is impossible, in this small compass, to expose all the naïve assumptions, errors of judgement and inadequate research crammed into these last forty-four pages.[60]

When Hughes was finding his feet as a critic in the early-1960s, he could be unpredictable in his opinions. He had a reputation, as Pierce would put it, to write first and ask questions afterwards.[61] In an article written for *The Nation* in January 1963, Hughes named Smith, along with Elwyn Lynn, as one of three good critics

[56] Hughes, *Things I didn't know*, 266.
[57] Smith's new history of Australian painting, *Australian painting, 1788-1960*, was published by Oxford University Press in 1962.
[58] Robert Hughes, 'Art: Painting in Australia', *London Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 8, 1 November 1963, 67.
[59] Hughes, 'Art: Painting in Australia', 68.
[60] Hughes, 'Art: Painting in Australia', 68.
[61] Pierse, *Australian art and artists in London*, 111.

writing on Australian art.[62] Smith wrote art criticism for the Melbourne *Age*; these reviews reveal Smith to be an insightful and fair critic, largely unimpeded by dogma and bias.[63] And yet, eleven months later, Smith's abilities to judge art were seriously called into question by Hughes. It is difficult to reconcile his earlier positive comments with the negative assessment that followed, which was particularly unfriendly. The review of *Australian Painting* was written shortly before Hughes left Australia and may have been intended as a parting shot.

Unfortunately for Smith, the chapter in *Australian Painting* on the art of the 1950s left him vulnerable to Hughes's attacks. Hughes took aim at the author's alleged failures of judgement and errors of fact. Worse for Smith, his historical objectivity was also doubted. On Smith's treatment of the art of this period, Hughes remarked:

> His approach is flawed because he seldom considers individual painting. His thinking is too abstract and generalized: dealing with the last ten years of Australian art, he concentrates excessively on societies, pressure-groups and manifestos, and not enough on the visions of the artists themselves. This works well when Dr Smith analyses the broad features of a movement. But the sluggishness of his responses to painting as such leads him into amazing failures of perception.[64]

Hughes, however, may have been justified in some of his criticisms. Smith's coverage of the art of this period was open to scrutiny; he was playing a dual role, that of author and actor. As the principal Antipodean spokesman, Smith was arguably too invested in these events to be historically impartial. But Hughes pushed his critique further, questioning Smith's aptness to commentate on contemporary art generally. Smith was accused of placing sentiment before quality

[62] Robert Hughes, 'Dog eats dog', *Nation*, 26 January 1963, 19. Hughes wrote: 'In the last 20 years, this weary failure to treat Australian art as a subject worthy of serious thought and speculation has been visibly overcome only thrice: first by the critics of *Angry Penguins*, second by Dr Bernard Smith, and most recently by Elwyn Lynn's curare-tipped comments in the Contemporary Art Society's broadsheet.' This important article provides a valuable insight into Hughes's developing approach to art criticism, especially the importance of language. He discusses his early influences and the role of the art critic. He is scathing of Australian art criticism and the quality of local art discourse. This article was republished in K.S. Inglis, ed., *Nation: the life of an independent journal of opinion, 1958-1972*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1989, 106-108.

[63] Bernard Smith, *The critic as advocate: selected essays, 1948-1988*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989. A selection of Smith's art criticism from this period is reprinted in the section 'Pluralism in Practice: the 1960s'. Smith summarises his philosophy of criticism, and what he means by pluralism: 'Pluralism, as I understand it, involves in practice the presentation of a personal viewpoint (at times quite strongly) but it also requires a fair treatment of artistic practices that do not accord with one's personal view. If it is possible to make it clear, either implicitly or explicitly, that these practices, these positions, are not one's own, so much the better. It is in part simply a matter of decent manners; an agreement to tolerate diverse positions, not a fatuous attempt to mimic them.'

[64] Hughes, 'Art: Painting in Australia', 67.

and bestowing undue praise on inferior artists who fitted his moral outlook. Hughes had David Boyd in mind, a painter he loathed. As Hughes put it, [Smith's] 'treatment of individual painters is itself a form of distortion. David Boyd, an inept echo of Arthur, is accorded two reproductions and a long passage of exculpatory prose wherein the Breughels and Le Nains are invoked'.[65] Meanwhile, Smith is also accused of ignoring artists of real ability, painters like Jon Molvig, 'one of the richest and most complex talents in the history of Australian postwar figurative painting'.[66]

But the most censorious remarks were reserved for Smith's account of contemporary art in Sydney. For Hughes, Smith had failed to understand the modernist tendencies in Sydney painting and had deliberately misrepresented these developments to support his own prejudiced conclusions. On the first point, Smith was admonished for mislabelling the painters John Passmore, John Olsen, William Rose and Eric Smith as Abstract Expressionists: 'It is plain that Dr Smith knows little of abstract painting in Australia, and brutally obvious that he understands nothing about contemporary American art'.[67] Smith's second assumption, that non-figurative painting in Sydney was a cultural import from the United States, was also strenuously rebuked: 'How this happened, Dr Smith does not trouble to explain. It would be hard to. There has never been an exhibition of avant-garde American painting in Australia.' Hughes continued to protest, 'Australian non-figurative art has virtually no affinity with the New York School'.[68] Only Peter Upward, a local gestural abstractionist, comes close to the 'physical immediacy' typical of American-style action painting. Rather than fashionable New York movements, Hughes identified Sydney abstraction with contemporary European practices, especially Spanish and French *Art Informel*. However, in Smith's defence, the problematic status of Abstract Expressionism was also hotly debated within Sydney art circles. As noted by Gary Catalano, Hughes's own attitude towards this style had changed during this time, from enthusiasm to ambivalence.[69]

In effect, Smith is accused of tilting at windmills. That is, of overstating the impact of Abstract Expressionism for the purpose of exaggerating the threat it presented to figurative painting. As Hughes saw it, international abstraction was a straw man constructed by Smith to justify his ideologically motivated Antipodean intervention.

> Dr Smith holds that the Antipodean group was not formed to oppose abstract art as such, but its power as "a mass movement arrogant and intolerant of all other forms". There is not much evidence to suggest that abstraction was, or is, in that position anywhere in Australia; Dr Smith confuses the critics' often misplaced dislike for certain figurative artists (like

[65] Hughes, 'Art: Painting in Australia', 70.
[66] Hughes, 'Art: Painting in Australia', 71.
[67] Hughes, 'Art: Painting in Australia', 69.
[68] Hughes, 'Art: Painting in Australia', 69.
[69] Gary Catalano, *The years of hope: Australian art and criticism 1959-1968*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981. See especially chapter 6 'The Primitive Impulse'.

> Arthur Boyd, or, more reasonably, David Boyd) with a blanket opposition to figurative art in all its forms.[70]

Hughes described this situation as a 'greatly overrated conflict'.[71] Thus, Hughes held Smith responsible for reducing Australian art to a Manichean battle of 'abs' (that is, Sydney abstract painters) versus 'figs' (Melbourne figurative painters). 'The upshot of this is that Dr Smith treats the last ten years of Australian art as a struggle between Light and Dark: the blot-scatterers of Sydney locked in rolling conflict with the image-preservers of Melbourne'.[72] Hughes rejected the premise of this conflict. Moreover, he viewed the supposed battle of values between these rival aesthetic factions as a fabrication, which disguised a much more mundane reality. Hughes always maintained that the real source of friction between the so-called Melbourne 'figs' and Sydney 'abs' was material; that is, a competition for market share.[73] This rivalry was exacerbated in lean times, when the Australian art market was confined to a small base of dedicated local collectors. But these tensions quickly subsided in the late-1960s, with the expansion of the Australian economy and the growing market for Australian art. There was, says Hughes, enough money for all styles and tendencies.

> It seems to me that their noble-sounding warnings about the meaning and fate of art in Australia really came down to banal turf squabbles over who, the Abs or the Figs, got the larger share of a very small art market. And these soon ceased to mean anything, because with the growth of Australia's business prosperity and the increasing fashion for art on the wall—whether as décor or investment—there turned out to be plenty of room for everyone.[74]

Smith on Hughes: remarks concerning Hughes the historian

When it came to the Whitechapel exhibition and the 'isolation' theme, Smith conflated Hughes and Robertson, despite their different interpretations of isolation and its root causes. For Robertson, isolation was an existential condition of Australian art, imposed on artists by their alien environment. For Hughes, isolation was a combination of geographic and sociohistorical circumstances, the latter resulting from a failure of cultural and intellectual authority in Australian society.

[70] Hughes, 'Art: Painting in Australia', 70.
[71] Hughes, *Australian painting today*, unnumbered page.
[72] Hughes, 'Art: Painting in Australia', 70.
[73] Dutton, *The innovators*, 169. Hughes is quoted by Dutton: 'It was less a matter of ideology than of competition for market. […] Later, the Melbourne painters gave a dinner for the Sydney ones at a dark bad restaurant (not Georges Mora's), where Perceval got hysterically drunk and challenged Olsen for a fight, and Olsen drew a line on the floor and dared Perceval to step across it. The thing I remembered best, however, was one of the minor Melbourne figures grabbing me by the shoulders and saying with great intensity: "You bloody slick abstract bastards, you want to take the bread out of our mouths, you want to take it away from us." That was what the whole division was really about.'
[74] Hughes, *Things I didn't know*, 232.

When Hughes's book *The Art of Australia* was finally published in 1970, his more flippant comments regarding isolation had already been recanted. Australian art was not cut-off from its European origins, and Australian artists were not 'thrown back on their own resources' as a result of their isolation. Instead, Hughes now recognised that Australian art had never been isolated from its European heritage. To understand Australian art, he now argued it was necessary to view Australian painting in relation to European exemplars, or prototypes. Indeed, says Hughes, 'one of the painter's first problems is always to bring himself into a coherent relationship with art history'.[75] This about-face made it difficult for Smith to renew his criticism of Hughes as a proponent of Australian 'primitivism', as advanced by the Whitechapel exhibition. Indeed, Hughes's new approach was not greatly dissimilar from that which Smith had adopted in *European Vision and the South Pacific*, his magisterial history of early Australian colonial art. This was a comparison that Hughes was keen to acknowledge:

> It now seems to me that the most interesting issue raised by Australian painting is the complex, partly sociological, issue of its pendant relationship to the European tradition, both old and new. A history of Australian art should be written in terms of its overseas prototypes. I did not write *The Art of Australia* in such terms because I was largely ignorant of those prototypes; and I only hope that some historian, in the near future, will perform on Australian painting since 1880 the operation which Dr Bernard Smith made on colonial art in *European Vision and the South Pacific*.[76]

Smith's review of Hughes's *The Art of Australia* was published in 1973. His review outlines Hughes's changing and often inconsistent position on Australian painting and its relationship to European traditions. The book's prolonged and unusual publication history spanned a period of five years, during a period in which Hughes's ideas and positions were rapidly evolving.[77] Smith summarises Hughes's three positions on Australian art. Firstly, isolation from tradition, which is revoked in favour of a second (modified) version of isolationism, namely, the view that Australian art is a minor imitation of international styles. Since his Whitechapel essay, Hughes held the view that Australian painters had received their knowledge of international art second-hand, via the medium of reproductions. Substituting authentic works of art for reproductions of originals had supposedly distorted

[75] Robert Hughes, *The art of Australia*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970, 313.
[76] Hughes, *The art of Australia*, 19.
[77] *The Art of Australia* had a difficult publication history. The first edition, published in 1966, was withdrawn from circulation and pulped. Poor production standards were blamed; the book was issued in paperback and faulty binding caused the pages to come unbound. Penguin Australia recalled review copies and cancelled the entire first edition; the second edition was published in the UK by Penguin Books in 1970. The original manuscript was completed in 1963; Hughes was living in Italy in 1966 when the first edition was published. He used this as an opportunity to rewrite large parts of the original manuscript, especially the last chapters covering contemporary art. For a contemporary account, see 'Regretful Penguins: Publishers apologise for cancelling book', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 February 1966, p. 6.

Australian art. Smith remarked 'that this view had become quite fashionable in Australian art circles in recent years', but as a '*sufficient* cause of provincialism', he added, 'it does not amount to much'.[78] When Hughes finally reached a third position that was akin to that held by Smith, he noted: 'so we come full circle, from an innocent art with no discernible prototypes to a provincial art whose main interest is its relationship to its metropolitan sources'.[79] Smith was not totally satisfied with Hughes's progress, however. While Hughes now stressed the importance of prototypes and the continuity of European traditions, he was also in danger of overstating the influence of overseas trends. Hughes's new position, says Smith, had swung too far in the opposite direction. Hughes was wrong to view Australian painting as simply a derivative offshoot of European art. Australian art had developed its own local traditions, which were not entirely dependent on European values.

The public discourse between Hughes and Smith was marked by a number of conciliatory and respectful exchanges. This started when Hughes acknowledged his indebtedness to Smith's book *Place, Taste and Tradition*, a ground-breaking work of Australian art history first published in 1945. This work, says Hughes, 'has an honoured place in the historiography of local painting, and was the first study to approach its subject historically rather than simply descriptively—that is, to look at the underlying patterns and causes of Australian cultural developments'.[80] While Smith found faults with Hughes's historicity, he praised his critical insights: 'the strength of *The Art of Australia* lies in its value as criticism'.[81] On writing about contemporary art and artists, Smith noted, 'Hughes always has something challenging, controversial and usually very much to the point to say.' He was especially impressed with Hughes's account of the Melbourne and Sydney art scenes during the war years, which as Smith put it, 'is handled in a masterly fashion'.[82] Like Smith, Hughes was disparaging of Sydney art of this period, and was encouraging of developments in Melbourne art. But in other areas, the exchange between Hughes and Smith remained tetchy. The Antipodean Manifesto remained an ongoing point of tension.

According to Hughes, Bernard Smith's Marxist convictions were behind his opposition to abstract art. Although Smith's political rhetoric had toned down since *Place, Taste and Tradition*, Hughes discerned a programmatic bias in favour of figurative painting in his writings. Hughes held the view that the Antipodean Manifesto was an extension of Smith's wartime position, when influenced by communism he had promoted social realism over formalism and surrealism. In the 1950s, abstract art was the new ideological adversary. There are, Hughes wrote in *The Art of Australia*,

[78] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 279. Emphasis original. Smith's essay 'Robert Hughes on Australian Art' was originally published in *Historical Studies*, vol. 15, no. 61, October 1973.
[79] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 279.
[80] Hughes, *The art of Australia*, 21.
[81] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 281.
[82] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 281.

> Significant contacts between Dr Smith's beliefs in 1945 and 1959. His Marxist stance had mellowed away, but the championing went on in similar terms. In his 1945 book *Place, Taste and Tradition* the École de Paris was 'the consummation of the decadence', just as in 1959 the 'Tachiste Emperor' was 'a blot'. […] In the Manifesto, the attitude moved up a few rungs. Abstract painting replaced surrealism and cubism as the bogey, while figurative painting (not necessarily social realist) became the Good Fairy. The social effect of art as morality-maker was still in view.[83]

Smith was angered by these accusations. He was especially sensitive to Hughes's comments about his so-called Marxist stance. There was, yet again, an inference that Smith had allowed ideology to blur his historical objectivity. Despite the publication of *Australian Painting* in 1962, Smith's wartime reputation as an erstwhile communist and a Leftist historian persisted. He was therefore forced to defend himself and his approach to writing history:

> And since I have been called to task in the discussion of the Antipodean Manifesto for the 'Marxist stance' that I adopted in *Place, Taste and Tradition*, I am delighted to plead guilty. Marxism provided me with the broad base of a system by means of which I have tried in my own work to bring my material into both a historical and an aesthetic focus. I have no doubt that there have been other, and modifying, influences as well, but Marxism has, I suspect (for who can know in such matters), been the major influence upon my writing of history.[84]

Smith was a generation older than Hughes, and although his new book, *Australian Painting*, was dependable and scholarly, it lacked the verve and panache of *The Art of Australia*. Inevitably, both books were compared. Eric Westbrook was diplomatic in his review; he recommended 'the two books should be read together'.[85] But Westbrook was also aware of the growing rivalry between the two, noting: 'Bernard Smith has fortunately not allowed himself to be raised as a national monument, so it will not need a National Trust of his fellow historians to protect him from this cheeky young vandal who chalks up rude, but often penetrating words on his academic gate'.[86] Although Donald Brook refrained from comparing

[83] Hughes, *The art of Australia*, 249.
[84] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 280-81.
[85] Eric Westbrook, 'Criticism without malice', *Walkabout*, vol. 31, no. 9, 1 September 1965, 39. Westbrook reviewed the first edition.
[86] Westbrook, 'Criticism without malice', 39. On Hughes and Smith, he noted: 'Inevitably *The Art of Australia* will be compared with Dr. Bernard Smith's admirable *Australian Painting, 1788-1960*, published by Oxford University Press in 1962, but partisanship will be of no service to either book. Hughes has much less space than Dr. Smith; he makes no attempt at a "full-scale definitive history of Australian painting"; and, as has already been said, his real concern is with the present situation, an area dealt with rather summarily by Dr. Smith. Inevitably, however, their paths cross and the older writer, while clearly having the respect of his junior, has to put up with some sharp criticism of his activities as spokesman of the "Antipodean" movement in Melbourne in 1959. Bernard Smith has fortunately not allowed

both books when reviewing *The Art of Australia*, it was easy to deduce from his comments which book he preferred: 'Robert Hughes' The Art of Australia is by far the most readable book on its topic, and in some ways the best'.[87] As Brook saw it, Hughes was wasting his talents writing art history:

> No doubt Robert Hughes would make an excellent scholar, but it would be a waste of talent […] His great strength is as an original commentator on works that he knows, and cares about, or genuinely detests. He is a man of opinions, quick with ideas and felicitous with words. He is a critic, not a historian.[88]

After the setbacks hampering the publication of the first edition were resolved, Hughes's book sold well; *The Art of Australia* earned a reputation as a popular and readable history of Australian painting. And yet, despite pointing out Smith's 'Marxist stance', Hughes had borrowed from *Place, Taste and Tradition*. In terms of illustration and thematic structure, a noticeable resemblance existed between his book and Smith's formative work. Perhaps for this reason, Smith reissued *Place, Taste and Tradition* in 1979; the book had been out-of-print for several decades. The relatively polite tone that characterised Smith's earlier review of *The Art of Australia* had now changed. A cantankerous foreword accompanied the new edition. Smith, in effect, accused Hughes of plagiarising his book.

> Then many years later Robert Hughes published his *Art of Australia*. In the preface he acknowledged his debt to *Place, Taste and Tradition*, an indebtedness which can be best estimated by correlating his use of quotations and illustrations with that of my own. Mr. Hughes's idea of writing history was to borrow the base and re-write the superstructure. His book provided a new alternative for schools and libraries, while copies of *Place, Taste and Tradition* disappeared from the shelves of such useful institutions to find their way as 'rare items' into the catalogues of auction rooms and antiquarian booksellers. Perhaps this is what Marx meant by a dialectical change.[89]

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himself to be raised as a national monument, so it will not need a National Trust of his fellow historians to protect him from this cheeky young vandal who chalks up rude, but often penetrating words on his academic gate. The two books should, in fact, be read together.'

[87] Donald Brook, 'Original voice on this country's art', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January 1971, 13. Brook continued: 'Robert Hughes' new Pelican *The Art of Australia* is by far the most readable book on its topic, and in some ways the best. It might have been absolutely the best if it had not striven too hard to be a history book, and over-extended itself.' At the time, Donald Brook was Smith's academic colleague at the Power Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Sydney. Smith and Brook had a frosty relationship.

[88] Brook, 'Original voice on this country's art', 13.

[89] Bernard Smith, *Place, taste and tradition: a study of Australian Art since 1788*, second edition, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979, 19.

In 1977, Smith retired from full-time academic employment. He spent much of the next decade contemplating his achievements and defending his legacy. In 1976, Smith published his first collection of essays and reviews, a sample of three decade's work.[90] This volume was followed by other collections, each a testament to Smith's intellect and prodigious output.[91] In 1980, he was honoured with a festschrift.[92] However, just as the Marxist pioneers of the social history of art, Arnold Hauser and Frederick Antal, were rebuffed by T.J. Clark and the British New Left, Smith became the target of a new generation of Australian writers.[93] On more than one occasion, Smith was forced to defend his youthful affiliation with communism and social realism.[94] This followed the publication in 1981 of Richard Haese's history of Australian wartime painting, *Rebels and Precursors*. Although Smith felt besieged, he continued to speak out against a 'Cold War' cultural agenda, in which modernism and cultural imperialism became increasingly conflated.[95]

[90] Bernard Smith, *The Antipodean manifesto: essays in art and history*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1976.
[91] Bernard Smith, *The death of the artist as hero: essays in history and culture*, Melbourne Oxford University Press, 1988; Bernard Smith, *The critic as advocate: selected essays, 1941-1988*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989.
[92] Anthony Bradley and Terry Smith, eds, *Australian art and architecture: essays presented to Bernard Smith*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980.
[93] See, for example, T.J. Clark, 'Art history: the conditions of artistic creation', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May 1974, 561-2. Clark's 'social history of art' rejected the 'determinism' associated with Hauser and Antal's accounts of artistic production based on historical materialism. In Australia, the theorist Ian Burn took a revisionist stance against Smith. See Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen, *The necessity of Australian art: an essay about interpretation*, Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1988. This book set out to challenge and critically examine the orthodoxies of Australian art historiography. The Marxist cultural historian Humphrey McQueen argued that Australian modernism 'emerged' independently from local social conditions. This account moved beyond provincialism and the centre-periphery model, according to which Australian art was shaped by a sequence of 'arrivals' from abroad. See Humphrey McQueen, *The black swan of trespass: the emergence of modernist painting in Australia to 1944*, Sydney: Alternative Publishing, 1979.
[94] Smith's strongest rejoinder can be found in his essay 'Realist Art in Wartime Australia'. This is one of his staunchest political essays, where his views on 'late modernism' and 'the aesthetic values generated by the cold war' erupt in anger. Smith defends realism and the legacy of the Melbourne social realists from 'aesthetic censorship'. This piece first appeared as a chapter in Marianne Ryan, ed, *Angry penguins and realist painting in Melbourne in the 1940s: Hayward Gallery, London, 19 May to 14 August 1988*, London: South Bank Centre and Australian National Gallery, 1988. It was republished in *The critic as advocate*.
[95] Bernard Smith was among the first intellectuals to articulate a connection between New York modernism and American cultural imperialism during the Cold War. Eva Cockcroft would famously propose a correlation between American cultural imperialism and United States foreign policy in her essay, 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War', *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 10, 1974, 39–41. For an historical account, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: the CIA and the world of arts and letters*, New York: New Press, 1999. In 1974, Terry Smith (no relation of Bernard Smith) wrote 'The Provincialism Problem', an essay exploring a centre-periphery construct of cultural hegemony akin to that proposed by Smith. Originally published in *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1974, 54–9, this essay was reprinted in

Meanwhile, during this time, Hughes's reputation had gone global, propelled by his appointment in 1970 as the New York-based art critic for *Time Magazine*. A charismatic media personality, Hughes returned to Australia in 1975 for a whistle-stop tour, to film a ten-part television series based on *The Art of Australia*.[96] This was followed in 1980 by *The Shock of the New*, Hughes's international 'blockbuster' television series and bestselling history of modernism. Regrettably, Smith was not always considerate when responding to the younger generation of Australian art historians and expatriates. His foreword from the revised edition of *Place, Taste and Tradition* concludes with a combination of uncharitable comments and cheap shots at Hughes. None of his successors, he lamented, had lived-up to his expectations.

> It is not that one would want in any way to have monopolised a market. But it is disconcerting even to have assisted in fathering such intellectual children. If one is to be superseded it would be more gratifying to be superseded by a generation of historians trained to undertake their own research and possessed both of radical insights and that commitment to time and place without which history cannot be written. Neither a sense of irritation at what others write nor the opportunism, cynicism and fear that ends in exile are in themselves sufficient.[97]

Hughes's status as an Australian expatriate, or 'exile', affected Smith's assessment of *The Shock of the New*. Smith complimented elements of the book, especially Hughes's 'humanist' approach to interpreting modern art in relation to

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Transformations in Australian Art: the Twentieth Century—Modernism and Aboriginality, St Leonards, NSW: Craftsman House, 2002, 113–121. In this landmark essay, Terry Smith defined provincialism as "an attitude of subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of cultural values". On the power imbalance between the metropolitan centre and peripheral cultures, Terry Smith remarked: "Many American cultural institutions have international programs. The Museum of Modern Art is perhaps the most active–in the past 12 months it has toured exhibitions throughout Europe, South America, Australia and elsewhere. Such exhibitions may not be intended as tools of cultural imperialism, but it would be naïve to believe that they do not have precisely this effect. Although they may be conceived in the spirit of making available otherwise inaccessible art so as to provide a basis for human communications at levels 'transcending' political differences (itself an astonishingly naïve concept), when they emerge from the New York art world I have described, they cannot but carry the condescending implication of authority". For an excellent analysis of this essay and its intellectual context, see Heather Barker and Charles Green, 'The Provincialism Problem: Terry Smith and Centre-Periphery Art History', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 3, December 2010, 3-BG/1, https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/media_183176_en.pdf

[96] In early 1975, Hughes returned to Australia to film a ten-part television series for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation called, *Landscape with figures: the art of Australia*. It was aired in 1975. The series comprised ten thirty-minute episodes: 'The chains of Arcady', 'Mutton and gold', 'The mateship commune', 'The fat young nymphs', 'Modernism!', 'The angry decade', 'The charm school', 'Antipodeans', 'Directions', 'Wood ducks and tyre-kickers'.

[97] Smith, *Place, taste and tradition*, 19-20.

historical events and the social and technological contexts of modernity. Modernism's 'human context' was therefore greeted by Smith as a welcomed alternative to 'the rigid strait-jacket of formalism into which New York critics like Clement Greenberg have sought to confine it'.[98] 'For those seeking an introduction to the subject,' Smith added, *The Shock of the New* is a useful book. But it is also, he quipped, 'very much an Establishment book'. There is 'no attempt to revalue the avant-garde canon', and 'all the grand old chestnuts of the first-year course in modernism pass through the projector once again, but now with all the authority of the BBC and the art critic of *Time* magazine'.[99]

Smith viewed Hughes's book and television series from a Gramscian perspective, as a product of cultural hegemony; that is, as 'a reinforcement of the European-North American cultural ascendency'.[100] For Smith, it was incongruous that Hughes, an Australian critic, should be espousing the hegemonic aesthetic of New York modernism without acknowledging his own cultural marginality. Or as Smith put it, 'consider Hughes' own position. He grew from Australian soil, as certainly as Cézanne grew from the soil of Provence, yet no Australian artist is mentioned in this survey of the art of the past century'.[101] Hughes had not only yielded to the authority of the metropolitan centre. He was also accused of effectively repudiating his nationality: 'Is this proof of Hughes' now mature critical objectivity or is it a conspicuous example of cultural cringe, the work of a well-trained Janissary at the court of MOMA?'.[102] Invoking a fashionable post-colonial line of argument, Hughes's account of modernism was dismissed by Smith as outdated: 'when even such official organizations as UNESCO are calling for a more diverse, more pluralist, view of international cultural achievement this book emerges as a very old-fashioned one indeed'.

However, Smith had allowed his ideological critique of cultural imperialism to obscure the art-historical dilemma *The Shock of the New* was highlighting. Far from being 'old-fashioned', Hughes's history of modernism raised questions of contemporary relevance to art history. At the time, Smith did not appreciate this, but in due course this matter would come to overwhelm him in the final decades of his life. On the one hand, *The Shock of the New* was a linear account of modernism, a lavishly illustrated textbook replete with familiar masterpieces and iconic works of twentieth-century art. But Smith failed to comprehend the core thesis that Hughes was advancing. Hughes's book was among the first popular works of art history to identify the paradox at the heart of the modernist narrative. When modern art ceases to be modern, it is consigned to art history. Without a continuous forward momentum, the avant-garde project will falter, and ultimately fail. Newness without progress will end in obsolescence and novelty. As Hughes himself

[98] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 305. Smith's essay 'Robert Hughes on Modern Painting' was written for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1981. For reasons unexplained, this review was not published until 1989.
[99] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 306.
[100] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 306.
[101] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 306.
[102] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 306.

explained, *The Shock of the New* was an attempt to chronicle the history of modernism, from its beginnings in the nineteenth century to its end in the 1970s.

> I think the series did, in terms of popular consciousness, write some kind of *finis* to the idea of modernism as a continuously ongoing avant-garde phenomenon. This heretical proposition first came to be discussed in the mid-'70s, and certainly at the time that I began the series, it still seemed a very novel idea. By the time that we'd finished the series, it was three years later, it was less novel. I think what the series did was run in the idea of modernism as a closed historical period.[103]

Arthur Danto, the philosopher/art critic, was among the first to theorise this phenomenon from the perspective of contemporary art and the New York art world.[104] Danto's 'End of Art' thesis roughly coincided with Hans Belting's historiographic essay, 'The End of the History of Art', which considered the implications of 'post-modernism' in relation to broader art history.[105] Smith had spent much of his career resisting the hegemony of 'international' modernism, a cosmopolitan aesthetic he equated with avant-garde abstraction. The counter-position he had constructed, as an opponent of post-war cultural imperialism and a defender of figurative painting, was largely dependent on the persistence of this hegemony. When Smith reviewed *The Shock of the New* in 1981, he could not fathom a state of affairs in which modernism was not ideologically and aesthetically dominant; hence his empathic denial: 'Modernism is not dead'.[106] But Smith was too preoccupied with Cold War cultural politics to grasp the internal dynamics of contemporary art and criticism. His belated attempts to come to terms with the global and historical legacy of modernism resulted in *Modernism's History*, published in 1998, and his proposed period style for the art of the twentieth century, the 'Formalesque'.[107] This questionable concept, which Smith hoped would be recognised as his major contribution to art-historical discourse, fell on deaf ears.

Conclusion: similarities and differences

Despite their differences, a grudging respect developed between Robert Hughes and Bernard Smith. This became more apparent in later years. It was, ironically, in the field of general history (as opposed to art history) where Hughes and Smith found their common ground. Hughes published *The Fatal Shore* in 1987, his book about white Australia's formative history as a British penal colony. This work transformed Smith's opinion of Hughes; it was described as a 'book of enduring

[103] Hughes is quoted in Clyde Packer, *No return ticket: Clyde Packer interviews nine famous Australian expatriates,* North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1984, 13.
[104] Arthur Danto, *The philosophical disenfranchisement of art*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
[105] Hans Belting, *The end of the history of art?*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
[106] Smith, *The critic as advocate*, 307.
[107] Jim Berryman, 'Bernard Smith's Formalesque and the end of the history of art', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 123, no. 1, 2014, 3-16.

merit', which will 'probably prove a classic that will be read for generations'.[108] In terms of scholarship and subject matter, it was a book that Smith could relate to. *The Fatal Shore* was likened to *The Australian Legend*, Russell Ward's radical account of the origins of Australian national identity, a book which Smith greatly admired. Smith also favourably compared Hughes's history of convict Australia with Jules Michelet's monumental history of the French Revolution.

When it came to the Antipodean Manifesto, Hughes answered Smith's challenge. This topic overshadowed most of their exchanges and was the source of most of the bitterness that characterised their public dialogue. Smith, however, was spurred on by this; indeed, with Hughes, he had found an antagonist with whom he could engage. When Hughes dismissed the Antipodeans Exhibition as a 'lame controversy,' he was evidently downplaying its significance. The fact that the Manifesto continued to occupy Hughes's attention indicates it was not as trivial as he liked to imply. Ironically, Hughes's ongoing attacks only served to intensify this controversy, thereby compounding the importance of the Manifesto and its place in Australian art history. Smith welcomed intellectual interaction and debate. This formed part of the dialectical process of history. He was disheartened by the 'contempt of silence' that followed the publication of *Modernism's History*.[109] Hughes was the type of dialectical opponent that Smith needed, one who would refute or accept his arguments and drive debate forward.

Smith is justifiably recognised as Australia's most important art historian. But this reputation has overshadowed his contribution to intellectual history, a neglected field of Australian historiography. In this regard, there are similarities with his contemporary Manning Clark, whose contribution to intellectual history has also been forgotten. When it came to Australian colonial society and its European origins, both realised that the most enduring connections were intangible. For Clark, civilisation was transported to settler Australia as mental baggage, as beliefs and values derived from Protestantism, Catholicism and the Enlightenment.[110] Similarly, for Smith, the Renaissance tradition transcended the art of Quattrocento Italy. A convention of European picture-making (and seeing) was transferred to Australia via intellectual traffic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hughes, however, undervalued the conceptual transmission of culture. Without actual collections to refer to, he struggled to comprehend the existence of European art history in Australia. It was, perhaps, for this reason that Hughes found his calling as an exemplary modernist critic, for whom the aura of the original was always paramount. Only tangible and authentic works of art counted. In the 1980s,

[108] Bernard Smith, 'The fatal subject', *Scripsi*, vol. 4, April 1987, 59.
[109] Bernard Smith, 'History business: An interview with Bernard Smith by Christopher Heathcote', *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 196, December 2006, 15.
[110] Jim Berryman, 'The theme of civilization in Manning Clark's *History of Australia*', *History Australia*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2017, 82-98.

his perspective put Hughes at odds with emerging postmodern art practices.[111] In New York, he remained a modernist critic in an increasingly pluralist art world.[112]

There were significant points of disagreement between Smith and Hughes. They belonged to different generations, which may have partly explained their divergent tastes and values. But Peter Beilharz is accurate in his assessment; there were also considerable parallels. Unlike some, Hughes did not consciously pit himself against Smith; Hughes, says Beilharz, effectively 'worked alongside Smith, sprinting'.[113] Hughes was indeed the archetypal young man in a hurry. He was a quick learner who amended his views and accepted Smith's arguments when it suited his position. Hughes recanted his early stance on isolation and adopted Smith's centre-periphery perspective, in which European prototypes were recognisable in Australian painting. In a nod to Smith, he named his 1975 television series *Landscape with Figures: The Art of Australia*. This was a reference to the category 'landscape with figures,' which Smith had used to refute the myth of isolation and which, he argued, testified to the presence of Renaissance tradition in Australian art.

While Smith's experience was firmly grounded in Australia, his perspective has been described as relational rather than national.[114] Imperialism and the legacy of colonialism were always implicit in Smith's so-called 'antipodean' outlook, a viewpoint which had political as well as situational connotations. According to this view, the movement of cultural traffic between the centre and periphery is not invariably unidirectional. But in the realm of cultural exchange, the periphery will always occupy a subordinate position in relation to the dominant (hegemonic) centre. A spatial dimension is therefore discernible in Smith's understanding of Australian art. Because proximity to Western art history was dependent on geography and power, Australian artists were always consigned to the outer fringes of the Western canon. Although not isolated from this tradition, Australian art was marginal, and often marginalised, in relation to the art of Europe and North America. As Smith noted in the 'Myth of Isolation', 'the waves flow outwards'.[115]

With this in mind it is possible to draw a distinction between Smith and Hughes, based on their respective points of view. Whereas Smith viewed Australian art from a spatial perspective, as occupying a marginal position in relation to the metropolitan centre, Hughes tended to view Australian art from a temporal perspective, as a retrograde art behind the times. 'We now live in a linear culture,' Hughes wrote in *The Art of Australia*.[116] This bold statement encapsulates a worldview that was quintessentially modern. Hughes saw modernism as universal, a force of progress that would dissolve the spatiotemporal distance between cultures and countries. As he noted in the Whitechapel catalogue, 'time slipped a

[111] Ian Britain, 'The nostalgia of the critic: postmodernism and the unbalancing of Robert Hughes', *Thesis Eleven*, no. 34, 1993, 67-88.
[112] Arthur Danto described Hughes as a 'modernist critic' in a post-historical art world. Arthur C. Danto, *After the end of art: contemporary art and the pale of history*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, 145.
[113] Peter Beilharz, *Imagining the antipodes: culture, theory, and the visual in the work of Bernard Smith*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 150.
[114] Beilharz, *Imagining the antipodes*, xii-xiv
[115] Smith, *The death of the artist as hero*, 228.
[116] Hughes, *The art of Australia*, 313.

cog' when contemporary art crossed the Equator for the *Herald* Exhibition in 1939. Hughes, however, was impatient with modernity's progress in Australia. He could not afford to wait for Australian art to synchronise with international modernism. The time gap had narrowed in the 1960s, but it had not closed enough to prevent Hughes from leaving.

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