

Paul Taylor and the Brisbane sound

David Pestorius interviewed by Helen Hughes

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HH: Your text ‘The Brisbane Sound: An Illustrated Chronology’ notes that Paul Taylor visited Brisbane in 1981.¹ What were the circumstances of his visit?

DP: He delivered a lecture at the Institute of Modern Art on Thursday July 16, 1981. The second issue of *Art & Text* had just been published and the title of the lecture was ‘*Art & Text* in the Australian Art Context’,² which suggests it was probably an echo of his ‘On Criticism’ editorial from the first issue. However, Taylor was not only in Brisbane to promote his new art magazine. He was also here to see Howard Arkley’s exhibition, ‘Wall Painting: Muzak Mural’, which had opened at the IMA the previous week and for which he had written the catalogue essay.³

HH: At the time, John Nixon was not only the IMA director and curator of the Arkley exhibition, but also an artist with an active exhibition and studio practice, which included the collaborative Anti-Music project. The Arkley show conflated painting and muzak at the same time as Taylor and Philip Brophy were raising the formula of disco as a way to think through the prevalence of appropriation art in Australia. How do you see these different modes of music (Anti-Music, muzak, disco) functioning as theoretical tools for Taylor here?

DP: I don’t think this rhetoric around disco came into it at all. Basically, Taylor was positioning Arkley’s installation within a history of wall painting, from Renaissance frescos to Constructivist environments (Lissitzky, Buchholz, Mondrian, etc.), to the chapels of Matisse and Rothko, to ‘the vagaries of interior decoration’. In other words, he saw the work within a kind of Minimalist lineage, which was about activating the viewer and rendering them reflexive. What’s especially interesting is how he inserted the Cagean notion of ‘all sound is music’ into the equation. Taylor makes the point that ‘both walls and muzak are greater than the spectator, they surround and manipulate yet so often go unno-

ticed’.⁴ Arkley’s IMA wall painting was therefore not only concerned with the spatially receptive viewer, but also one who is acoustically receptive. At the time, Cagean thinking was hugely influential on artists internationally. Back in the day, Dan Graham spoke of the important links between the New York No Wave groups and Cage, while one only needs to read the hyperbolic pronouncements of Anti-Music, especially those of Peter Tyndall’s *Invisible Music* and Gary Warner’s *Forced Audience*, to get a sense of how important Cage was in the local context. Incidentally, Taylor also mentions Cage in the ‘On Criticism’ piece, which was more or less contemporaneous with these Anti-Music texts.

HH: Do you think Anti-Music coloured Taylor’s reading of Cage?

DP: He would have been familiar with the manifestos of Anti-Music, but, as I say, Cage was very much in the air at the time. Dan Graham’s observations were published in April 1982 in the catalogue for the first major international survey of the new crossover culture.⁵ That pioneering exhibition did not take place in New York, London, or Berlin, but under the umbrella of that year’s Biennale of Sydney. Curated by Bill Furlong, the British artist whose *Audio Arts* cassette magazine had only months earlier released an Anti-Music sampler, the survey featured over forty projects, with many coming from cities around Australia. There were also many contributions from New York, including by Laurie Anderson, Glenn Branca, Rhys Chatham, Brian Eno, Dan Graham, Kim Gordon, Thurston Moore, and Lee Ranaldo. Furlong’s curatorial rationale was that Cage was the glue that held it all together. Many of the artists close to Taylor participated, including Philip Brophy, Maria Kozic, David Chesworth, John Nixon and Peter Tyndall. It’s curious that the catalogue for the Sydney show was omitted from the bibliography published in the catalogue for Taylor’s famous ‘POPISM’ show, because all of these artists resurfaced in that context a few months later. Of course, by then, this new crossover culture had been fermenting in diverse contexts, here and overseas, for some time. For instance, only weeks after Arkley began to channel muzak in Brisbane, Judy Annear curated ‘Noise & Muzak’ at the George Paton Gallery and Taylor wrote a catalogue essay for that show too.⁶ Incidentally, Bill Furlong participated in ‘Noise & Muzak’, which overlapped in many respects with his sound survey at the Biennale of Sydney the following year. And, just to continue on the theme of muzak, earlier the previous month, *Invisible Music* published a manifesto

in *Pneumatic Drill*, the newsletter of Anti-Music.⁷ Obviously, the group name Invisible Music was strongly evocative of Cage, while the manifesto brilliantly summarised how his philosophy was being thought about locally at the time. With respect to muzak, the manifesto had this to say: 'Invisible Music encourages the development of muzak and other musics intended for specific uses. However, it recommends that, to develop further, muzak needs to be first stripped of any vestiges of tune.'⁸ Gary Warner's Forced Audience manifesto, a few issues later, in a kind of 'call and response' approach, involved a witty reiteration of the Invisible Music polemic. Paul Taylor was very close to all of this and it was fitting, I think, that he would make the photomontage that graced the final issue of *Pneumatic Drill*. The photomontage depicts a family of desert Aborigines sitting down with a portable audiocassette tape recorder/player and appears under the title 'The Art of White Aborigines'. The cassette tape recorder was the quintessential instrument of Anti-Music and represented the new democratic possibilities of the new art/music. The title and the composite image must be understood as a kind of graphic analog to Taylor's Popist theory, while also perhaps pointing to the emerging phenomena of contemporary Aboriginal art.

HH: What exactly do you mean by 'new crossover culture'? What were the main channels for this crossover, beyond exhibitions?

DP: It was the latest break with 'official' art — its forms, contexts and systems of value — that began with Conceptual art in the late 1960s. I think what sparked it was punk, which had a lot in common with Conceptual art, the actions of the Situationists and, of course, Dada. During the post-punk years, the rock context was seen as offering new outlets, audiences, and opportunities for a kind of anti-rock with roots in a fine arts tradition. In other words, there were discernable links to performance art, Cage, experimental music and advanced theatre. Melbourne had quite an elaborate infrastructure for this activity, with multiple overlapping scenes, including the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre, The Crystal Ballroom in St Kilda, the Little Bands in Fitzroy, Art Projects, and the George Paton Gallery. In Brisbane, the scene was much smaller and most of the activity was self-organised in small inner-city halls and seedy little clubs. Nixon's collaborative Anti-Music project, aspects of his program at the IMA, his Q Space project, and Jeanelle Hurst's One Flat Exhibit, were also important crossover contexts here in the early 1980s. The Brisbane scene also had a

political edge that was largely absent in other cities around the country. Obviously, the performative work was the main game, but the new crossover culture also manifested itself in unconventional forms of exhibition, vinyl records, audio cassette recordings, Super-8 films, Polaroid photography, photocopied zines and other publications, including Bruce Milne's audiocassette magazine *Fast Forward* and Ashley Crawford's *The Virgin Press*. In 2010, I tried to capture this diverse mix in the exhibition 'Melbourne->Brisbane: Punk, Art & After' (Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne), which included over 20,000 words all over the walls in an attempt to critically build the context, but unfortunately there was no stand-alone catalogue.

HH: What other ways did Taylor collaborate with Nixon? I think you suggested that Taylor was involved directly with Nixon's Society for Other Photography?

DP: I think the photomontage for the final issue of *Pneumatic Drill* in 1983 was his only direct contribution to Anti-Music. Having said that, it's clear Taylor was closely associated with Nixon in the early 1980s. He appears wearing headphones, presumably listening to an Anti-Music recording, in one of the large Polaroid pieces by The Society for Other Photography, one of Nixon's many projects at that time. One of these pieces was included in 'POPISM', although it's rarely, if ever, mentioned in dispatches because it doesn't sit so well with the brash appropriation art that so dominated the discourse. The same goes for the 'POPISM' catalogue, which has the slightly dry look of 'classic' conceptual art. Its design is also strongly evocative of El Lissitzky, which, in my eyes, points again to Nixon, whose work in the early 1980s involved a multifaceted re-working of Russian Constructivism. Of course, there were other artists in 'POPISM' who were toying with the tropes of Constructivism, with Robert Rooney and Richard Dunn coming to mind.

HH: Were there other direct channels of influence between the cities? For instance, do you think Paul Taylor and *Art & Text* had an impact on the Brisbane scene?

DP: It's hard to measure the impact *Art & Text* and Paul Taylor had on Brisbane. I know in certain quarters there was antipathy because of all these Melbourne directors of the IMA — John Buckley, Nixon, and then Peter Cripps — who were seen as 'blow-ins', people not really interested in the local scene. Taylor and

Art & Text would have been seen as part of that. I actually think Peter Cripps's engagement with local artists but also Brisbane's recent past, especially the new crossover culture, was quite remarkable and I tried to point this up in the 'Melbourne-<Brisbane' exhibition. People are also quick to forget that Nixon, with his art dealer's hat on, represented a number of Brisbane artists at Art Projects, not the least being Robert MacPherson. There's a tendency today to present Art Projects as a kind of proto-ARI space, but this is quite misleading. The truth is it was a dealer gallery that held monthly changing exhibitions and represented, promoted and sold the work of a small group of artists.⁹ One need only look at the Art Projects ads in *Art & Text* to get a sense of this. It's almost inconceivable in today's highly institutionalised world of art that John could wear so many hats, but back then it was more possible. He had extraordinary drive and ambition ... and he still does! Perhaps he could have done more for Gary Warner, who was represented as part of the Anti-Music collective and whose diverse material production would have been a good fit in 'POP-ISM', which did not include a single Brisbane artist. Again, I think it's hard to be too critical here because Gary was also a member of perhaps the most promising of the Brisbane Sound groups, Peter Milton Walsh's Out of Nowhere. In mid 1981, they collaborated with Anti-Music on a split-cassette, but I think there was soon a perception that Gary had forsaken art for a life in rock'n'roll.

HH: Most commentaries on *Art & Text* note the impact of capital-T 'Theory' on the production and interpretation of art in Melbourne from the early 1980s onwards. Was there a similar shift towards Theory in Brisbane at this time? What were the main channels (i.e., was there a Brisbane journal undertaking similar/related projects to *Art & Text*)?

DP: Certainly artists here read the theory-laden pages of *Art & Text* religiously in the early years. But there was a healthy skepticism too. For example, in April 1983, *Art Walk* — which was one of the offset-printed magazines produced in connection with Jeanelle Hurst's One Flat Exhibit project — published one of the most insightful critical rejoinders to the invocation of French theory in the name of art by Taylor and others in the early 1980s, although today this remarkable text languishes in obscurity.¹⁰