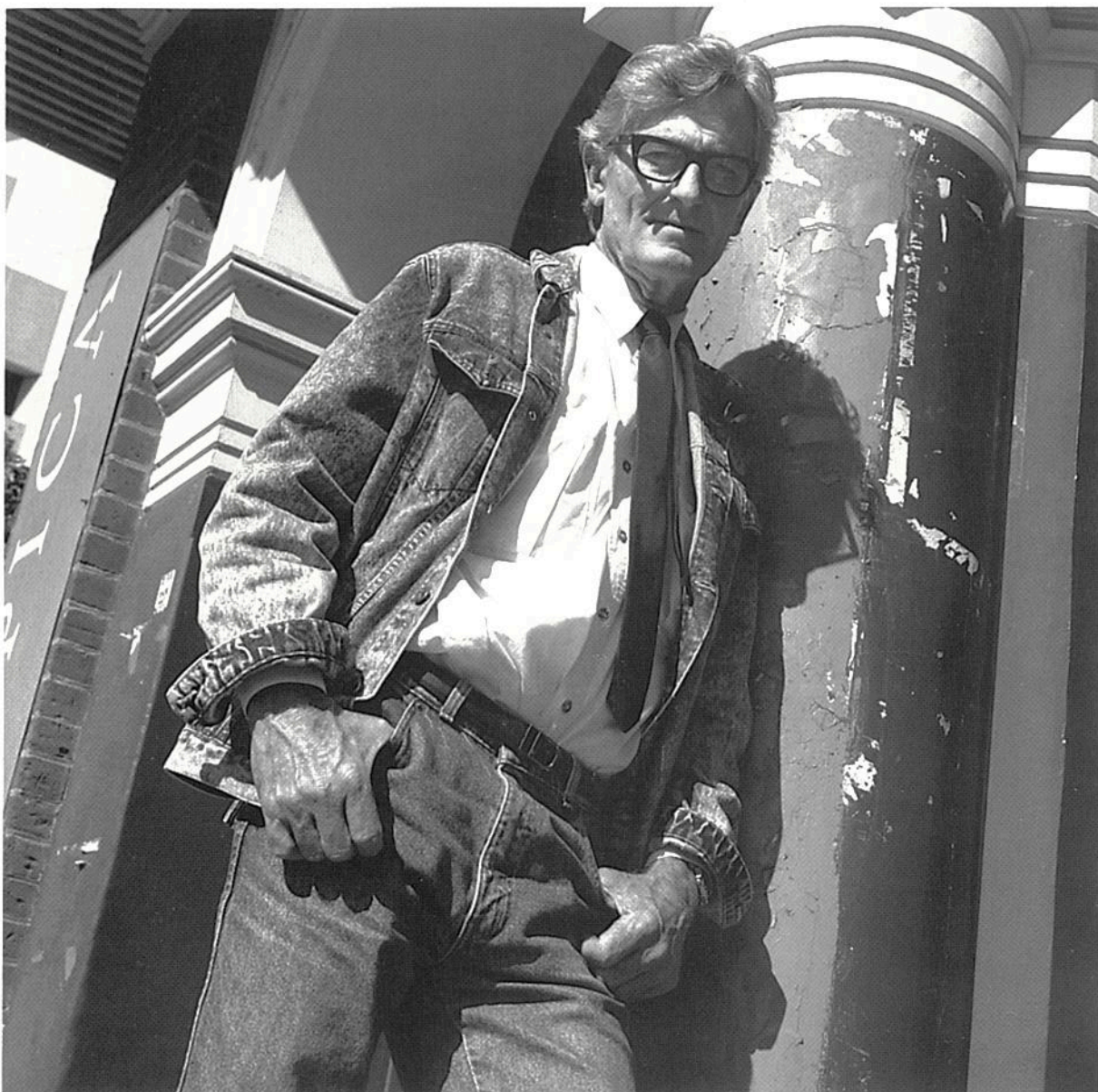


Photography Max Moore



BRIAN MCKAY

INTERVIEWED BY DAVID BROMFIELD

Brian, congratulations on your Emeritus award and also on the commission for Central Park, Perth. How do you react to the idea that you are now somehow involved in a hierarchy of Western Australian artists and indeed Australian artists.

I didn't see myself belonging to a hierarchy until the night of the presentation of the award at Fremantle where the political side of it appeared. This presentation was organised by the Minister Jo Dawkins, to emphasise the number of Western Australian artists who have been given grants and in particular my own award, being the second West Australian artist to get this, which I thought was a very generous thing on the part of the minister to do. I suppose bringing Howard Taylor (the other emeritus award winner) up made for some hierarchical status for West Australian artists.

But I didn't see anything past that other than that the award was unexpected for me. I don't know who the referees were and it was just something that I was very proud to receive. As you would know no one sets out to be rewarded for the extra hours one puts in to the arts. You do it because you believe in it, not for any profit or to be rewarded in any form. I just accepted that I was interested in the socio-political role of the arts.

Could you tell me a little bit about how your commission for Central Park came about. How do you feel about undertaking such a major public work?

At an earlier period in my work I talked about geometric structure with a lot of architects. Local architects bought my work because they responded to it as I had responded in the first place to the need to do it. A lot of the major architectural firms had my work in their offices including some people from Forbes and Fitzharding. Gary Giles from that company recently approached me and asked if I would be interested in looking at a commission. And I said that yes I would.

I had no idea what was involved. When they showed me the site they gave me the choice of materials that I wanted to work with. Did I want plaster, did I want hardboard, canvas whatever. When you look at a piece of canvas 20 metres long by 9 metres high, it's pretty big. And there was also the consideration that if I was going to work in an abstract way as against a linear type of way that I would have to be fairly precise.

So I went on to the site and saw these big sheets of aluminium and I thought that it seemed like site specific material that I could use. I went to the factory and asked about the durability of this. I went up to Gordon Hudson the conservator at the State Gallery and asked him what it was like to work on aluminium and he said it would be fabulous. The material that I had to use had to be very hard and durable to withstand accidents. I used this Maxithane paint and did the research on it with the chemist from Dulux paints.

But the interesting thing was that I resorted to the 70s, back to that grid geometry. The idea of these panels being exactly 1.3 metres square - that precision appealed to me. So the whole basis of the work is the

notion of a square. I mean one half of the entire mural is a square standing on its point and then it is deconstructed out and reorganised in structural cubic form at every aspect of it. So I just went from one thing to the other in the notion of working at that level with those materials.

If you think right back to when you were looking back at the Domus magazine images in the 50s, it is almost as if you've somehow fulfilled the dream from an image in a magazine. You've moved to a point where you are actually now doing the original yourself.

Yes, like a major public art piece.

You did remark that the commission was a fulfilment of one part of your career. It is quite clear that it is a kind of fulfilment of this dream of architecture, surface and structure.

Exactly right. And the idea that I am working on a gridded system is appealing to me because it does away with the romantic notion of the landscape and aboriginal motifs and all that kind of stuff. I didn't want that because I felt the building itself will become a classic 21st century structure.

Australian artists just can't handle expressionism. It is a very peculiar thing to say but they can't do it without oversentimentalising it.

That's right and I wanted to get away from sentimentalisation. Not that I'm not a sentimental person but I hated the idea of it.

I want to explore the notion of public commissions with you because it bears on your concerns about socio-political matters. You have had one other very important commission, the Trade Union banners. In your mind what are the chief differences between the two, from the point of view of an artist working for a client but also from the point of view of how these two different kinds of work will speak to a public. Is it the same public? Is it a different one?

No, it is vastly different public and it's a vastly different concept because what I find much more akin to my capabilities is this huge public mural. I haven't had any doubts about my ability to carry this through, not from day one when I was asked.

But with the Trade Union banners there was an entirely different dimension altogether, a historical one, wound into the project. There was this perception on the part of the unions who I found to my surprise were very innately conservative. They wanted

a return to their past. I thought I was going to use modern technology to produce these banners on material that was more suitable than canvas and screenprint these images on. They wouldn't have a bar of it. So then I had to fall back on a resource that I am not equipped to use and I just had to do the best I could.

I think it shows that I feel much more confident in this big, big thing which is ten times the size and feel of the other thing. It was interesting to do the Trade Union banners but on reflection the people I had to assist me, the assistants, Josie Croft and Laurie Smith and people like that were far better artists in that genre than I was. So there's an irony there.

In the case of the Trade Union banners it was really the client who required this of you. It seems that the client at Central Park has a different view of things. Would that also be conservative?

If they are conservative I'm working quite well within the bounds of that conservatism. I don't think that what I am going to do is very radical apart from the fact that it will be unusual for Perth I think, because if you look at the major works around town they don't have the same scale for a start.

But anyhow there was a meeting at the Department for the Arts with the client, with the architects, with the builders, the CMIEU unions and people like that. They asked questions about what we did. We had our drawings and we had our maquettes, in a sense it was waving this in front of the Department to see whether the Department felt this was appropriate as public art. There were about nineteen people there. It was really interesting and a lot of them felt that my thing was unsatisfactory: 'Wouldn't it be better since this is Public Art, if we had some decent furniture in the foyer and eight or ten big paintings of local artists instead of giving all this to one artist?'

The client had to step in and say, 'Now hang on, wait a minute, the other works are public art but this art in the building itself and belongs to the tenants in the building'. So it isn't seen as a public access except for those people who come in to do business in the building or the people who rent the rooms out. So they then said, 'We have decided that this artist is the person who fits the bill for the building and the architects and the client'. So it is not seen as Public Art in that sense.

Yes I can see the point of that but I think the process you've just described to me is an interesting one. It raises a big question in my mind about the whole nature of thinking, particularly Labor Party thinking, about public art and how it should be.

I'll have to think about that because I have a lot of

trouble with community art. I think the people who manage community art, with the best intentions in the world, don't really understand what art is. Do you know what I mean?

Yes, I agree with you entirely. It is a very peculiar situation.

It is extraordinary that they've suddenly got the power to interrogate the architects and the unions and the artists who come in to the building as to the suitability of the work and whether it fits their plans of what community art is. I'm really grateful that the architects and the client supported the notion that I am an artist. I have been commissioned to do an art work that is going to be in the public space but it is to do with my perception of what Art is about. They gave me a free hand. I don't have any impositions or anything in the way of conditions laid onto me, like this voice that came up and said, 'let's have some decent furniture and six or eight big paintings on a wall'.

And it doesn't matter what is in the paintings so long as there is enough of them and it is democratic. But can you see a genuine role for art in articulating community identity and how would it work?

Well look at Fernand Leger. He maintained that it was the primary role of the artist to do monumental work in public. He made these marvellous maquettes which he then handed on to whomever wanted to pick them up, to the students and the artisans. He felt that it was almost a responsibility of the artist to maintain his own integrity about his/her feeling for what the work should be and for that to be let loose on the city without confines or bodies of committees or anything like that.

That is why I think he was marvellous in the way that he had this perception about the monumentality of works and made all these wonderful maquettes which only recently have been constructed in ceramics and fired up and glazed. So I have the notion that an easel painting or studio painting confines the artist and confines the audience because it is either bought by someone who just shoves it in a room or the gallery or whatever.

That is why I was so excited about this opportunity which was given to me to make this work. It becomes a statement about me as an individual artist doing this piece that will be a form of involvement with the public at a certain level, without it being community art. It will be a major work of art accessible to the public but without the confines or what I think are the confines of community art.

What means are available for the artist working within the community? I know you've had different experiences of that yourself and you've worked with people who have different approaches to it.

I'm not quite sure that I can answer the central part of your question which is about what a major work of art in the community should or shouldn't be. When I came back to Australia in the 70s with political experience behind me and became a teacher I was an innocent and didn't know anything about community art.

I was very fortunate to meet Allan Vizents, Paul Thomas and Jeff Jones who were really disgruntled with the standard of teaching and the standard of art criticism in Western Australia. They were appalled by the standards of art teaching and the lack of constructive art criticism here. Allan had come from the States and Paul and Jeff had come from the UK and there was me fresh from the UK with all those influences. I mean it was just amazing that you could have people writing their views in the newspaper without an informed background. You could pull anyone off the street and they could write about art and that was that. There was no perception of an intellectual kind or any sort of inquiry about what art was.

So we started there, with the perception that art education was appalling, into the formation of Media-Space. That coincided with my feeling about art as a social commentary, and meeting people like yourself and Donald Brook. I also met Hans Haacke and Conrad Atkinson. And others involved in the political, theoretical and philosophical side of art.

So I am sort of split down the middle. I love the notion of being an artist, that is working in the materials and the manner in which I have since I was six years old and being able to elevate that into a commission of this significance. At the same time I am interested in the theoretical side of what art is and the analysis of the meaning of people's perception: what is a work of art and what is a load of rubbish and how informed are we in making that judgement. That intrigues me.

The central question that goes to the heart of the Media-Space experience is: 'Do you think that art can change things?'. And if so what? Because obviously Media-Space believed that, they must have believed that, to do the things they did.

Oh I think they did and I think some of the work that came out of Media-Space attempted to do just that. I mean Anzart in Hobart was an example of that and there are pieces of work we did which were directed at changing people's consciousness. I mean the perception that art can change people to some degree, not necessarily change them politically but can give them another perception that informs them at another level. If art is about information or the dissemination of information or the exchange of information then people like Haacke and Conrad Atkinson spend their lives trying to formulate information.

I'll give you an example. At Anzart in Hobart you may have been at the sound poetry performances. A big

bloke got up and he looked like an executioner in a big black belt and his bald shiny head and a huge beard and big black boots and either side of him was a speaker with a recording of a child's voice of about three or four laughing. But then you wondered whether the child was laughing or crying.

So he started his poem into the microphone and the poem consisted of the word No, just the word No. And he spoke for, it must have been about eight minutes just saying the word No. Perspiring veins standing out on his head, pleading, roaring, shouting, you know and that performance stays in my mind as clearly as the Rembrandt self-portrait in Kenwood in London. Now, that has made the same impression on me. It may not change the world, may not change my political beliefs about art but it changes my perception of the possibilities that lie in the means of communication.

To get back to the community art people again. It seems to me that they have made the mistake of thinking that art is somehow a consumer item, that you have a commodity that you can deliver in the same way that the State delivers other pseudo-consumer items, like health (which is also not a consumer item but we won't go into that).

And the same mistake is being made in TAFE, because they are training people for industry. 'Design for Industry', that is the buzz phrase.

So you don't really believe in the characterisation of art as an industry then?

No, absolutely not. It seems like a romantic view because people can say well art is a three billion dollar industry for Australia. I am not suggesting that you shouldn't sell your work or anything like that. But there has to be this independence where an artist works in private, then decisions are made by the audience or the public as to whether or not it is worth buying or whatever. These are two totally different things.

I must say it lacks a lot of subtlety. When you think of industry, you think of manufacturing and that is a very poor analogy indeed with a work of art.

Yes, but then some people see art as manufacturing. People have said to me why do you fuck about with what you do when you could be making these paintings and selling them because people like the work and they'd buy. You'd become wealthy and have a BMW and a house in Mosman Park and all that kind of stuff.

Well, that is not what it is about. But there are, of course, without naming names, people in Western

Australia who've done just that. I have expressed opinions about their work quite frequently. Reflecting on your time in Western Australia since you returned, has it been very very hard for you to pursue the course you have chosen in a time when there has been an enormous amount of money going through art here? Frankly, I've never seen a place where it is easier for the right kind of artists to make an enormous amount of money without putting themselves out too much. The current picture of Western Australia as a place where there isn't that much of a resource for the visual arts is entirely misguided. Money is just dripping out of the galleries but it is all being spent on things that I don't like very much. Watching that, what do you think about it?

Well I guess there is in me some kind of resistance to capitalism. I think that informs the view that I hold that art is separate. When I say this, people say I'm an elitist and out of touch with reality or humanity, because the whole world is made of commerce so you can't step outside the commercial kind of thing.

I am also aware that you can't just sit in a studio and produce hundreds of paintings and turn them to the wall, any more than you can sit and write in a room and then just tear your writing up and stick it in the bin. So what you have done needs to be examined by the public and then judged as to whether it is good. But to get back to your original question, about this opportunity that I obviously could have had and didn't take: I went into the examination of criticism or meaning through my involvement with the Media-Space group. The Praxis group was informed I think by the political, the pure political agenda that I'd got involved in in London which was in form by 1968. Artists making some sort of a statement. I think art can change certain things in the world. I think literature is a much more powerful means of changing people's perceptions in a direct political way than any of the visual arts.

I don't think the visual arts can do that to the same degree. If you go back to Goya, that he hasn't stopped war any more than Carson's photographs of the Vietnam war stop fucking war because we've got another one coming up in the desert now. So there is this impotence, I think, which makes it easier to deal with the commerce, and to commodify everything you do and sell it. But I think it is to do with a moral and ethical view as well. I guess it is just this gnawing suspicion that there is more to life than just making money on a circuit of security. I mean my Dad used to say (my old man was conservative, always dressed nicely and wore a tie and a good suit) you get on with making money, money is what secures people, makes them secure in their head.

Given all that, you were very involved in the development of PICA. Without going in to the history of PICA in detail, what do you think it has achieved in the last year or so? What are the things that you are most proud about and the things you're least happy with in the way that it has developed?

I think they are two good questions. The answer to the first one is the three or four people that we've had out here that addressed the issues that what we are talking about. That is Ian Breakwell, Kevin Atherton, with reference to art in public spaces and Kevin's talk. Very impressive. He also impressed the people from the Department for the Arts and I don't think that he was given enough mileage. The other one was John Carson. Carson was very interesting as well. Those are the three. There have been some good and some very bad exhibitions. I think what will have to take place fairly soon is an understanding of PICA's actual role. Events may catch up with it in the sense that it can't be another art gallery, it can't be a museum, it can't be a commercial gallery. It's got to be something that looks at culture and examines it and interrogates it in some form because that was the origin of the whole thing.

What sparked me off, what informed me about the need for something like PICA, not necessarily PICA, but something like PICA, was a talk at the ICA in London in 1969 by Ivan Illich. I saw a poster outside the National Gallery saying there was a talk at the ICA that night by Ivan Illich on his book *De-schooling Society* which is a highly contentious political survey of Western education. And along I went and there were about 300 people there and here was this little thin man standing up on the platform. He proposed that not only is contemporary education corrupt but it has a mechanism in it to maintain that corruption. Anyway there was a hell of a bloody uproar from people from the ILEA and people from various colleges etc and they were shouting at this and waving their arms around. So he invited them up on the platform, just a thin reed of a man and it was a very very impressive and exciting kind of thing to be at. You saw that this guy's proposition was about the corruption of education, state education. I went out of the building very excited and hyped up. I looked up and I saw ICA and I wondered what that had got to do with art because I had always thought the Institute of Contemporary Art was confined to painting and drawing and sculptures.

I didn't know that the BBC had filmed Illich and when I got home somebody said they'd seen it. So just out of curiosity I looked up the audience figures in *The Listener* and six million watched that debate from the ICA. It was just extraordinary. So I thought it would be great if there was an institution that had that role of debating our social and cultural structures. I thought that is what we needed here.

Don't you find it paradoxical that the ICA in London was given all kinds of independence principally by Roland Penrose who sold a few paintings from his collection to set it up? Now PICA doesn't have that kind of freedom does it? It is still very closely aligned to the bureaucracy that you described to the broader political agenda, which is not necessarily a party political agenda at all but the broader institutional political agenda. All arms of government are under pressure to justify themselves in terms of political returns. To the extent that PICA is closely connected to an arm of government, that kind of justification

would be expected of it and you might find yourself back to populism again.

It troubles me a bit because first of all there is innate conservatism in this State. At one stage, mainly due to Allan Vizents' perception of a centre for interrogation of culture, we had a very active critical structure in Media-Space. I mean I don't think interrogation is the right word but perhaps dissemination of information about culture or whatever. To present the structure in some form that is understood by politicians wasn't easy because it is the last thing that a politician wants.

You wouldn't want them to understand, you'd just want them to agree to it.

That's right. But then you see we were fortunate that David Parker because of his intellectual capacity was able to understand at least the promise this thing, this idea held, although for a long time it was just a building and just an idea. What we hope for after the physical changes in the building is some kind of an income generating system in there that would offer independence. But I know what you are saying, what we need is a Roland Penrose type to give PICA the autonomy it needs.

It's a very good point and one we have to face. I mean we talked about it in the past at various Board meetings and things. Being supported by the Department of the Art or the Government, is a very tenuous thing.

Would you like to say something in particular about PICA's aspirations in the field of education, because it seems to me that you began with the notion that in Western Australia education in visual culture wasn't very good. How has that worked out? How has the idea of PICA, as a kind of centre for the broader dimensions of visual experience worked? Is it bringing students and others into the place?

Well, one of the encouraging things is the development of Stage 6 at Perth Central Metropolitan College and the hopes are when St. Brigids closes down that the college will be a centre for art. Up to the closure of the PICA building for renovations there was almost a constant attendance by the students from the Fine Arts and even from the Graphics and Art History people, who would come in and talk to Noel, the director, or look at the work, or the lecturers would bring them in. There has been participation on the part of the WACAE students as well. We've sent Ian Breakwell out to WACAE and Kevin Atherton and the other people we were talking about.

The disappointing thing has been the lack of interest from Curtin University as a major teaching institution and it seems to me as if the students out there are being discouraged at one or two different levels from participating in any way with the ideas behind the educa-

tional basis of PICA. There has been a marked reluctance on the part of some senior staff at Curtin to involve themselves at any level. I mean, they might put in an appearance here and there when it suits them, but there is a marked reluctance on the part of the senior staff to encourage the students to come in and find out how they can use the space. Nobody can be more democratic and welcoming to students than Noel Sheridan. So that is a big disappointment.

What do you think it is that is alienating people, or what reason do you think they might have for not wanting to be involved?

I don't think people in general are alienated from PICA, but it seems to me that this major arts institution is actively discouraging participation by some students.

Do you think it might be simply once again the refusal to grow up? The reluctance to become part of a more dynamic, diversified scene.

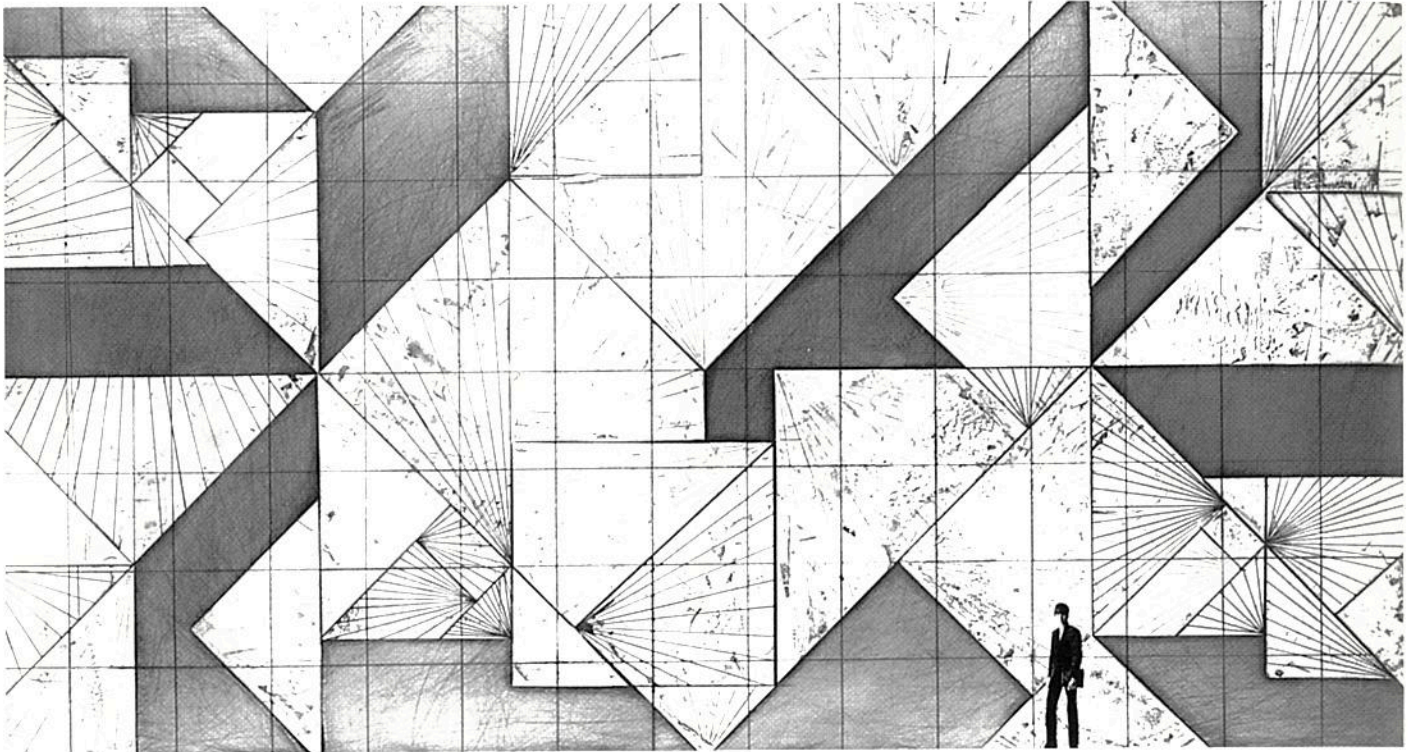
I think so yeh. You could say that. It is a reluctance to participate in something that challenges the notion of teaching standards in Western Australia and I think that is to the disadvantage of the art students generally. I mean when we had Ian Breakwell go out to WACAE there was standing room only. When he gave a tutorial to the third years out there the students came up to me and said this guy is wonderful, this is the best thing that has happened to us in three years of teaching out there. There was an attempt for Ian to go out to Curtin and they made it too difficult for him to go. Now I'm not saying that it was deliberate, it is just that those students were robbed of the opportunity to have a direct encounter with a major British artist who is doing some extraordinary work. I find it extremely disturbing and disappointing, that that level of censorship takes place.

The Annual General Meeting disturbed me greatly. The range of people who are prepared to be members of PICA seems very narrow.

Up to now, sure. And a main aim of PICA, when it reopens, will be to create new audiences. It has been very difficult to have anything in that building: music, dance, exhibitions, impossible for exhibitions as an exhibition space. Everybody comes into the building and says, Jesus what a wonderful building. Sure it is a wonderful building but you try to apply any kind of activity in there that addresses any problems and it is extremely difficult.

But this will change.

You see, I talk to a lot of people who feel that the place has potential and they are looking forward to using PICA. When we had that consultative committee,



Brian McKay, Artwork Installation, Central Park Tower Foyer.

there was so many people who wrote extraordinary letters and documents as to what they felt about the place, how it could be used. So all that is still there. I mean, out in the general public we have people writing from all walks of life, you know, sending in ideas, their ideas, some of them were crazy way off the top of the hill.

It doesn't worry you that Perth might still be too provincial to have that kind of venture?

It does worry me, but there is an inevitability about that. If it fails it will mean that Perth is too provincial and too conservative to support the notion that what it is doing in a cultural sense can be examined and justified. You know more than anybody how much

bullshit is got away with in this State in the name of Art. Unless we can get some people who are prepared to have some sort of criteria for judging what cultural activity is or how we make culture we'll fail, because you are not going to get it from the Golden Summers and the State Gallery, or the Library, or the Museum, or the Fremantle Arts Centre.

No it has to be lived. That is the point.

I agree!