

**SIMON PIERSE**

**Alannah Coleman: 1970—A year at Bonython's Sydney Gallery**

**ABSTRACT**

When art dealer and entrepreneur Kym Bonython's new gallery opened in Sydney in 1967, it was believed to be the largest commercial gallery in the southern hemisphere. In early 1970, Bonython brought Melbourne-born art dealer Alannah Coleman over from London to take on the management of his gallery. Sadly, her appointment was not a success and lasted less than a year. Coleman re-organised the records and accounts along European lines and tried to put the gallery on a firm financial footing, but she met with opposition from staff, artists and Bonython himself. Bonython wanted the gallery as a showcase for new talent and was always on the lookout to spot 'the next goer'. The opening parties at Bonython's deplored by Coleman as 'open slather' evenings proved to be significant social events and the focus for cultural exchange, whilst in his solo shows, Brett Whiteley made innovative use of the gallery as a 'theatre', combining painting and sculpture with light and sound to transform the exhibition into a completely new synesthetic experience. In 1971, with funding from John Kaldor's Public Art Project scheme, Swiss curator and gallerist Harald Szeemann used the Bonython Gallery to stage a groundbreaking show of conceptual art that went on to show at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Without a regular external source of sponsorship or support, however, Coleman's fears for the financial viability of the gallery were eventually proved right when, after several further years of losses, it finally closed in 1976.

The period of c.1967–1972, now re-visited for its retro-culture fashion appeal, began with the Summer of Love and progressed toward a fashion free for all—a time when floppy wide-brimmed hats, sarongs, long muslin dresses and flared trousers proliferated. The period was also distinctive for its counter-culture, excess and progressive blurring of the gender divide. But in 1970, the year that Germaine Greer published *The Female Eunuch*, Gough Whitlam was still Federal Opposition Leader, waiting to seize power, and Australian troops were still in Vietnam. The pressure for change, both cultural and political, was building fast, and the Whitlam years (1972–75) would soon see an unprecedented period of Federal support for the visual arts, exemplified by the far-sighted and controversial acquisition of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* in 1973 for a yet un-built National Gallery of Australia. This was the year, as Sasha Grishin writes, when Australia first became regarded as 'a serious player on the international art market', the same year The Australia Council—a major source of

government funding for artists and cultural institutions—was established.<sup>1</sup>

A lot was happening in Sydney at the end of the 1960s: Gallery A, six years after its opening in Paddington in 1964, was already an established venue for progressive fine art in Sydney.<sup>2</sup> Inhibodress, an independent art space, was co-founded in 1970 by Peter Kennedy and Mike Parr. It was run briefly as a cooperative, providing a forum for performance and conceptual artists outside the mainstream.<sup>3</sup> Alongside these venues and others such as Watters Gallery (established 1964), were the galleries of two major dealers: larger than life machismo figures Rudolph John (Rudy) Komon (1908–1982) and Hugh Reskymer 'Kym' Bonython (1920–2011) (Fig. 1). Both were self-styled entrepreneurs who had fuelled the Australian art market boom to the point where it was kept in imminent danger of collapse. Rudy Komon, an émigré from Czechoslovakia to Sydney in 1950, had begun by hawking William Dobell's paintings from the back of his Ford Prefect car at weekends, while he worked as a chauffeur during the week.<sup>4</sup> In 1959, he opened the Rudy Komon Art Gallery in Woollahra. Komon was the first dealer in Australia to pay his artists a regular wage in return for representing them and selling their work.<sup>5</sup> His stable contained many of the big names: Robert Dickerson, Leonard French, Jon Molvig, Clifton Pugh, Fred Williams, and for a time, John Olsen. In a period of growing affluence in Australia there was a fortune to be made out of art if you knew how to recognise new talent. Kym Bonython prided himself on his ability to spot 'the next goer' but admitted that he was not so adept at selling on at the right time. Having acquired Russell Drysdale's *The Drover's Wife* from the artist in the 1950s for a few hundred pounds, he sold it with another Drysdale and a painting by Nolan to finance the building of a vast new gallery in Sydney. 'I thought the Drysdale was as high as it would ever go', Bonython later lamented, 'but it's four times that price now.'<sup>6</sup>

If the late 1960s was a heady time of big ideas and even bigger ambitions, none were

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<sup>1</sup> Grishin, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Coppel, 2011, p. 216.

<sup>4</sup> Bungey, 2014, p. 216.

<sup>5</sup> Nicklin, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> *People*, 1977, p. 29, where Bonython describes how he was able to buy Drysdale's *The Drover's Wife* and *Portrait of Margaret Olley* for 'what was a ridiculously small price [he paid £250 for *The Drover's Wife*] ... If I had *The Drover's Wife* now, I shudder to think what I'd get for it. When I sold it I thought the Drysdale was as high as it would ever go, but it's four times that price now.'

bigger than Kym Bonython's Sydney gallery (Fig. 2). When it opened in November 1967, it claimed to be 'the largest private gallery in the world, or at least the Southern Hemisphere.'<sup>7</sup> It was hewn out of Paddington's iron lace district from the site of an old chemical factory, bought by Bonython along with a cottage with frontage on Victoria Street. Space had been limited at the nearby Hungry Horse Gallery where Bonython had previously traded: a cramped, cockroach-infested space on a short-term lease. Bonython realised that he needed a much better exhibition space if he was to compete with Rudy Komon and other Sydney dealers who, since the early 1960s, had established a stable of artists as the foundation of their business. A big purpose-built gallery seemed like a good idea since artists at that time were painting big pictures and clients were buying them.<sup>8</sup>

### **A gallery ahead of its time**

Kym Bonython appointed Steven Langton, with Gordon Bull and Associates as consulting engineers, to design and build a dedicated exhibition space. The Bonython Gallery was a 'no expense spared project' and, from the outset, its size and ambition provoked criticism. Described by its detractors variously as a 'cultural supermarket' and 'Bonython's Folly', many, like critic Ross Lansell, felt that Bonython had perhaps over-reached.<sup>9</sup> Even Bonython himself wondered whether the gallery was ahead of its time. In what, retrospectively, may be seen as a prototype of the commercial 'white cube' spaces of later years, Bonython's gallery comprised three mechanically ventilated galleries illuminated by indirect, shadow-free fluorescent lighting, built around a 60 x 60 ft square courtyard for the display of sculpture. In total, it had well over 10,000 square feet of exhibition space. The open courtyard, like the gallery spaces, was paved with dark red quarry tiles and enclosed a fully-grown willow tree and a fountain featuring boulders and tropical plants gently sprinkled by jets of water. Daylight in the courtyard was kept out of the main galleries by recessed Japanese doors with rice paper infills that could be slid back into the cavity walls.<sup>10</sup>

The Bonython Gallery opened on 18 November 1967 with an exhibition of paintings and sculpture from London's Marlborough Fine Art. It included work by Francis

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<sup>7</sup> Buhrich, 1968.

<sup>8</sup> Ingram, 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Lansell, 1969.

<sup>10</sup> Buhrich, 1968.

Bacon, Henry Moore, John Piper and Oskar Kokoschka, and was shown alongside displays of Japanese pottery and tapestries by Australian John Coburn. Lansell, Bonython's most vociferous critic, opposed this imported exhibition and speculated whether Bonython 'really knows very much about art'.<sup>11</sup> Bonython responded in the press, expressing his determination to continue with such imported exhibitions because 'Australians need to see more than their own art to properly appreciate it'.<sup>12</sup> There was probably also an element of strategy in promoting links with Marlborough Fine Art, who had been representing Australian artists Sidney Nolan and Brett Whiteley in London since the mid-1960s. Evidently, the art market in Sydney was not yet sufficiently international to recognise the investment potential of such imported exhibitions. Bonython later recalled that:

Few people praised the Francis Bacon painting, priced at \$34,000 in that exhibition, but on the very morning it arrived back in London it sold for \$75,000. Today it would be worth at least twice that sum, and in 1978 the Art Gallery of New South Wales paid \$150,000 for a Bacon painting of similar size and quality.<sup>13</sup>

Interesting as these figures are, they serve to illustrate a fundamental failure on Bonython's part to understand the difference between *international* artists and *internationalism* in art. International art foundations were still in their infancy when, in 1969, Hungarian-born, Australian art patron and entrepreneur John Kaldor (b.1936) invited Christo and Jean-Claude to Sydney to create *Wrapped Coast*.<sup>14</sup> As Rebecca Coates observes: 'The project brought cutting edge contemporary international art to an Australian audience. It also brought Australia to a wider international consciousness: as a location and nation capable of commissioning and realising this sort of ambitious and hugely demanding project.'<sup>15</sup> From the Bonython Gallery, where he was currently exhibiting, Albert Tucker fought a rear-guard action with 'anti-Christo expletives', only serving to create more publicity for *Wrapped Coast*

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<sup>11</sup> Lansell, 1969.

<sup>12</sup> Lansell, 1969.

<sup>13</sup> Bonython, 1979, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> Rebecca Coates writes that: '*Wrapped Coast – One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia*, 1969, was the culmination of many hours of planning, organisation and work. *Wrapped Coast* was installed by the artists together with a daily workforce of around 120 people, including professional mountain climber, labourers, students from the University of Sydney and East Sydney Technical College, and a number of Australian artists and teachers. See Coates, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Coates, 2008, p. 1.

which became, for a time, the largest sculpture in the world.<sup>16</sup> It was the first in a series of Kaldor Public Art Projects that have taken place since 1969 to the present day.<sup>17</sup> One of these projects, directed by the Swiss curator, artist and art historian Harald Szeemann (1933–2005) would later take place in Bonython's Sydney Gallery in 1971.

Wonderful gallery though it was, Bonython's entrepreneurial energies were split between Sydney and his hometown of Adelaide in South Australia. He had opened his first art gallery there in 1961 and owned the lease on Adelaide's Rowley Park Speedway. For years Bonython continued with the regime he had established at the Hungry Horse, spending five days in Sydney every three weeks; catching the 6pm Saturday flight from Adelaide to arrive in time for the speed-car races at Sydney Showground. Sunday would be spent supervising the hanging with the exhibition opening the following day.<sup>18</sup> During this time he would live above the Paddington gallery in a small, kitchen-less bachelor flat with artwork by Ken Reinhard in the living room and in the bedroom, and a massive Weeties dispensing box, also designed by Reinhard, to provide breakfast. He would fly back to Adelaide on Thursday morning to prepare for the Friday speedway races.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, it soon became evident to Bonython that this regime could not work for the enormous spaces of his Paddington gallery.

### **Alannah Coleman**

At the instigation of Albert Tucker, Bonython invited Melbourne-born art dealer Alannah Coleman (1918–1998) to take on the role of gallery manager.<sup>20</sup> Coleman had been brought up in the Melbourne suburb of St Kilda and had known Tucker since she was an art student at the National Gallery Art School (1933–1939) where she had also been friends with artists Charles Bush, Sidney Nolan and Elizabeth Patterson (later to

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<sup>16</sup> See Heathcote, 2016, quoting Alan McCulloch, p. 294.

<sup>17</sup> Kaldor Art Projects: *Kaldor Art Projects*, <http://kaldorartprojects.org.au/about/our-story>; accessed June 3, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1966.

<sup>19</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1966.

<sup>20</sup> Coleman was a life-long friend of Tucker and campaigned tirelessly for his work in London, both before and after her year at Bonython's, until her death in 1998. She tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Tate Gallery to acquire one of Tucker's paintings for their permanent collection. Tucker held a major exhibition at the Bonython Gallery (28 October–19 November 1969), shortly before Coleman's arrival.

marry Nolan).<sup>21</sup> Coleman was a founding member of the Contemporary Art Society in Melbourne in 1938,<sup>22</sup> and, with Joan Malcolm, held an exhibition of paintings at the Velasquez Gallery in 1944.<sup>23</sup> In 1946 she moved to Sydney to live in Dowling Street, Woolloomooloo, in a rented house shared by the sculptor Oliffe Richmond and dress designers Francis Mitchell and Robert Henry.<sup>24</sup> In 1950, Coleman left Australia aboard the *Ranchi* to carve out a career for herself as an art dealer in London (Fig. 3). Had she remained in Australia just a little longer, she would have seen the rise of house-galleries in all the major cities in Australia, when art dealers began to extend their own homes or annex next-door property to create exhibition spaces for contemporary art.<sup>25</sup> The Johnstone Gallery was one of the first of such galleries, opening in Brisbane in 1950.<sup>26</sup> Anne and Tam Purves started the Australian Galleries in Melbourne in 1956,<sup>27</sup> and Rose and Joe Skinner opened the Skinner Galleries in Perth in 1958 to support the careers of Western Australian artists.<sup>28</sup> The result was that, with regional house-galleries in all major cities, contemporary artists could exhibit more widely and have more than one exhibition a year, and, as a consequence, business began to boom.

While these events were taking place in Australia, Coleman set up her London home as a gallery, selling Australian art from the walls of her Putney flat, and holding opening parties for her clients to meet expatriate artists such as Louis James, Francis Lyburner, Tony Underhill and Brett Whiteley. After a period as director of the Mansard Gallery in Heal's Furniture store in Tottenham Court Road, Coleman went to work with Ewan Phillips where she broadened her knowledge and experience, whilst continuing to deal in Australian art.<sup>29</sup> As an art dealer, gallerist, and curator,

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<sup>21</sup> Jones, 1998, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Donald-Bradley, 1998.

<sup>23</sup> The Velasquez Gallery, located in Tye's Building, Bourke Street, was one of the few places to exhibit in 1940s Melbourne. In 1948, twenty-seven of Sidney Nolan's *Kelly* series paintings were shown here for the first time. See Donald-Bradley, 1991.

<sup>24</sup> Donald-Bradley, 1991. Coleman briefly offered Sidney Nolan accommodation at Dowling Street, after he had left the Reeds at Heide, and before he moved in with Cynthia Reed at Wahroonga. Nolan rewarded Coleman with a painting (*The Long Night*, 1950) that she later took with her to London.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Blackman, conversation with the author, Canberra, December 2006.

<sup>26</sup> It ran until 1972 under the aegis of Brian and Marjorie Johnstone. State Library of Queensland: *State Library of Queensland*, <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/showcase/johnstone-gallery-archive>; accessed 3 June, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> It still runs as a family business with Stuart Purves (son) as director.

<sup>28</sup> The gallery closed in 1976. See Australian National University: 'Skinner Rose', *Australian National University*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/skinner-rose-11707>; accessed June 3, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Denvir, 1994.

Coleman was stylish, feisty and independent, respected in London for her knowledge and support of Australian art and artists. She assisted Whitechapel Art Gallery director Bryan Robertson by loaning paintings by Albert Tucker to the 1961 exhibition *Recent Australian Painting* (Fig. 4). Robertson later paid tribute to her as a 'disarmingly quiet, calm, patient, and good-humoured' woman, who 'worked hard, not only as a dealer on behalf of fellow Australian artists visiting or living in London ... but also as an unofficial, gently persistent ambassador for Australian culture.'<sup>30</sup> He furthered:

Coleman had a typically Australian disregard for protocol, convention or any form of stuffiness. Her standards were always high; she had no interest in working as a dealer on a commercially broad front, with work of variable quality, simply as a money-making business. She dealt only with a comparatively small number of artists whose work she felt strongly about and whose careers and well-being she helped in many ways to further with a sustained interest and curiosity.<sup>31</sup>

The high point of Coleman's career in London was the exhibition that she curated as a curatorial riposte to the officially sanctioned and selected show *Australian Painting – Colonial – Impressionist – Contemporary*, which opened at the Tate Gallery in January 1963. Coleman was able to select paintings and sculpture directly from the studios of both young and established Australian artists working in London at the time. She remained proud of the fact that she had been among the first to recognise the new talent of an emerging generation of artists such as Michael Johnson, Tony McGillick, Ron Robertson-Swann and Vernon Treweeke, all of whom would go on to show in the seminal exhibition *The Field*, held at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne in 1968. Coleman's show *Australian Painting and Sculpture in Europe Today* opened at the New Metropole Arts Centre in Folkestone and went on to tour West Germany. Sir Kenneth Clark gave the opening speech on 19 April 1963 when he praised the show for its 'vitality and promise' and pronounced that it heralded a new phase where 'Australian painting is just a part of modern painting.'<sup>32</sup> Coleman's contribution to new-generation Australian art was officially recognised later the same year when the Australian government invited her to act as Commissioner General in

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<sup>30</sup> Robertson, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Robertson, 1998.

<sup>32</sup> Pierse, 2012, p. 209.

Australia's submission to the *Third Paris Biennale for Young Painters* in Paris, a submission which she severely criticised for being lack-lustre and underwhelming.<sup>33</sup>

Through her interest in kinetic art and involvement with Signals Gallery,<sup>34</sup> and her participation in avant-garde projects such as Yoko Ono's *Film No. 4* (better known as *Bottoms*), the screening of which was banned by UK film censors in 1967,<sup>35</sup> Coleman demonstrated her credentials as a gallerist who engaged with the broadest field of contemporary art practice. Throughout the mid to late 1960s, as many of her artist friends returned home to a booming Australian art market, Coleman joined forces with Ewan Phillips' Maddox Street gallery and became known as the resident Australian art expert in London.<sup>36</sup>

When Coleman received Bonython's invitation to manage his Sydney gallery, it must have seemed an attractive offer. After all, she had been absent from the Australian art scene for nineteen years, and it would have appeared to her a logical, even inevitable, next step to follow her Australian artist friends back home in pursuance, both of her career, and also theirs. Had not Sir Kenneth Clark pronounced that Australian art had entered a new phase? Australian subject matter as an expression of Australian identity—the whole expatriate scene—had changed forever. Or, as Patrick McCaughey wrote in a review of the 1967 *The Field* exhibition: 'artists had risen over regional issues and were engaging in an international dialogue.'<sup>37</sup>

Bonython was keen to engage Coleman since he believed that her reputation and contacts with the London art world would enhance the international reputation of his gallery. It would be good for business too, since Coleman's connections with Ewan Phillips Gallery meant links with a London dealer in Australian art to underscore the

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<sup>33</sup> Pierse, 2012, pp. 227–228.

<sup>34</sup> Signals Gallery (1964–66) was briefly a centre for experimental avant-garde, especially kinetic, art in London. The Filipino artist David Medalla (b.1942) first exhibited his bubble machine ensembles (Auto Creative Sculptures) here in 1964. See England Gallery: *England Gallery*, <http://www.EnglandGallery.com/signals-1964-1966/>; accessed June 3, 2017; and Tate: *Tate*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/medalla-cloud-canyons-no-3-an-ensemble-of-bubble-machines-auto-creative-sculptures-t12201>; accessed June 3, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Royal Albert Hall: 'Yoko Ono's Bottoms', *Royal Albert Hall*, <http://www.royalalberthall.com/tickets/events/2017/screening-yoko-onos-bottoms/>; accessed June 3, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Ewan Phillips had been the first director of the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, after the war. See Denvir, 1994.

<sup>37</sup> Heathcote, 1995, p. 206.

existing collaboration with Marlborough Fine Art that had been forged through an agreement with Tony Reinhard of Marlborough's New London Gallery.<sup>38</sup> For her part, Coleman could foresee that the whole art business in Australia would be different from the one she had left in 1950. Back then, the market was small and under-developed; now it was overheated and cash driven. But what she could not countenance was that the gallery skills, accountancy and good practice she had acquired working for Ewan Phillips would bring her into conflict with Kym Bonython and his gallery. It would all too soon become evident that she brought with her experience of a very British style of gallery management and a conservative approach to dealing that was out of step with the early 1970s Australian art market.

### **Alannah Coleman returns to Sydney**

Coleman arrived in Sydney in February 1970, to take over the management of the gallery from Mary Andrews.<sup>39</sup> Her appointment, whilst creating a great deal of interest in the Australian press, was, from the outset, fraught with difficulty.<sup>40</sup> She had returned to an Australian art world more affluent, sophisticated and culturally aware than the one she left in 1950. Coleman brought with her a traditional European style of gallery management that entailed the keeping of detailed provenance records, books and accounts. While she was aware that the centre of the Australian contemporary art market had shifted back home, she nevertheless expected her reputation in the British art world to be acknowledged in Australia. But now most of her Sydney clients seemed to be the nouveau riche—the wealthy owners of factories making socks or brassieres, as she put it. It did not chime with the role she saw for herself: the kind of dealer who 'is often asked to gather together small collections for clients who want to leave paintings to their children.'<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, her genteel approach was at odds with Bonython's broader vision for contemporary art. Bonython was constantly looking for new artists to discover and was proud of the fact that he never turned anyone away. 'I recognise that 999 out of 1000 will be a waste of time, but that one you sense is a gem turns up occasionally and you'd kick yourself if you

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<sup>38</sup> See Heathcote, 2016, pp. 183–184.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Andrews was wife and business partner of celebrated Sydney designer, Gordon Andrews (1914–2001).

<sup>40</sup> For example, *Sydney Morning Herald*, Jan-Feb 1970; Perlez, 1970; Sheldon, 1970.

<sup>41</sup> *The Bulletin*, 1970. 'I think it's a good thing.' She continued: 'And you can't really lose. Yes, lots of painters do get left behind by the market after each new wave, but if they're good it's never forever. The good things always come back.'

missed it.<sup>42</sup>

### **The gallery as visitor attraction**

The new Bonython Gallery was a showplace but its sheer scale was soon to prove a stumbling block to efficient management. On seeing it for the first time, Coleman was horrified by its size and confused, part public, part commercial identity. While there was a program of public exhibitions running throughout the year, visitors paid a 20-cent admission charge to wander through and admire the design and décor, feeling the curtains and examining the floor tiles, but invariably with little to no intention of buying anything (Fig. 5). Children ran around unsupervised, banging into glass, and theft was a constant problem. The gallery was so large that proper supervision was virtually impossible and during the year 1970, several valuable items including a diamond ring and Sepik River artifacts were stolen from exhibitions in the gallery.

In public statements Bonython was clear in defining his gallery as an 'exhibitor gallery' rather than as a 'dealer gallery'.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless it had to pay its way. Coleman set about making the changes she thought appropriate, working in the gallery from morning till night and lodging in a small hotel across the road. First she tackled the administration, which was in disarray. There was a large backlog of unanswered mail and none of the five members of gallery staff had much knowledge of record keeping; neither did they understand the need for precise and detailed provenance records. Kym had told her that Australians would think 'provenance' was a French restaurant.<sup>44</sup> With the exception of Robin Gibson, her colleagues were largely ignorant about art, and lacked initiative. Gibson was soon promoted to the position of assistant manager and encouraged to attend art history classes at the Power Institute. The rest of the staff was eventually sacked when they proved unhappy or uncooperative with the new regime.<sup>45</sup> A new order was imposed and a new team of young staff was schooled in an essentially British way of doing things. An English

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<sup>42</sup> *People*, 1977, p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> White, 1976.

<sup>44</sup> Donald-Bradley, 1988.

<sup>45</sup> Coleman relates how she fired her previous assistant director after she left invigilation duties in an exhibition of jewelry in the upstairs gallery and came downstairs to smoke a cigarette. (Coleman had previously imposed a ban on smoking in the gallery.) The rest of the staff who came in to complain about her dismissal were also sacked. Two Spanish cleaners, who left, but thought differently about it the next day, were re-employed.

trained secretary with an electric typewriter was appointed because Coleman did not like the Americanised style of Australian correspondence. Reliance on the telephone was out and everything had to be backed up on paper with the result that within a month files and records were back in order.

Coleman remained deeply concerned that the gallery was not operating efficiently and that its confused identity limited its financial potential. Occasionally the three large spaces of the Bonython Gallery would be given over to a solo show, but more usually each room contained separate exhibitions booked to run concurrently for three weeks at a time. The choice of artists was often discordant and the quality of the work varied enormously. Discussions with Albert Tucker and Lord Goodman,<sup>46</sup> whilst he was over on a visit to Australia, confirmed in her mind the need to make strategic changes.<sup>47</sup> Coleman was keen to build a gallery stock of works by well-known artists with established reputations. This could be achieved through prudent buying at auction and by purchases made from private collectors. The reliable income stream accrued in this way made it possible for a commercial gallery to support and promote younger, less well-known artists. Coleman planned to improve and increase the stock so that it contained more early and mid twentieth-century work by Australian artists. But she faced continuing opposition from Bonython even though he had described using a similar strategy to the press some four years earlier, when he explained: 'Profits from the ready-selling artists like Nolan, Boyd and Tucker enable me to put on shows of the younger painters' works and to encourage their efforts even though people may not buy many of their pictures.'<sup>48</sup>

Coleman carefully monitored the art market, buying up the work of artists represented by Bonython's gallery, but she was dubious about the high prices of contemporary Australian art in relation to the global market and considered some artists' prices grossly inflated—a Charles Blackman painting that cost as much as a drawing by

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<sup>46</sup> Chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain (1965–1972).

<sup>47</sup> The Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra regularly sent distinguished visitors and celebrities to Bonython's Gallery. On his visit, Lord Goodman not only aired his views on the gallery, but was free with his opinions on the art being exhibited there. He reportedly asked: 'Miss Coleman, when will you tell these Australian arses to stop doing all this American stuff? Everything I admire is figurative.' See Donald-Bradley, 1988.

<sup>48</sup> *Sunday Mirror*, 1966.

Fragonard was a memorable comparison she once made.<sup>49</sup> Bidding up a work at auction (if the artist was represented by Bonython's gallery) was a strategy that she used to keep prices high and stir up publicity; she would also bid for any work she knew was undervalued, even though the hammer price was high. A case in point was a painting by Arthur Boyd that she bought for such a high figure that it made newspaper headlines the following morning. Bonython was furious when he read the news, but Coleman's judgment proved to be sound when, just three weeks afterwards, she resold the painting for twice the price she had paid for it. She clashed again with Bonython later that year when he refused to buy two paintings for the stockroom from Brett Whiteley's solo show at the gallery (Fig. 6).<sup>50</sup>

Coleman implemented a tiered commission policy for artists under contract with the gallery. Previously there had been a 30 per cent commission policy for all—even for those well-known artists whose work usually sold itself, and whose exhibitions brought both regular clients and publicity to the gallery. Coleman reduced commission for these established artists whilst raising it to up to 50 per cent for younger and less renowned artists whose careers were still in development and who needed considerable promotion. This variable rate of commission, which was common practice in the galleries in London, initially proved unpopular with Australian artists who thought it elitist and undemocratic. Another controversial move was the implementation of a buyers' preview—a gallery opening for selected clients, critics and the press where artworks could be discussed and buying encouraged. This would precede the usual opening party, moved to the following night, when, invariably the place would be 'awash with wine and people would sit around on the floor smoking pot.'<sup>51</sup> Bonython, whilst aware of the expense of entertaining freeloaders, felt that 'an opening should be an artist's moment of glory and I'm not

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<sup>49</sup> Donald-Bradley, 1988.

<sup>50</sup> In an interview with Wendy Donald-Bradley in 1988, Coleman relates that the works were *Kookaburra* (1970) and an *Olgas landscape*, adding that *Kookaburra* was subsequently sold to an American buyer. But see also catalogue notes to auction of *Young Kookaburra Taking its First Laugh*, (Mossgreen, *Fine Australian and International Art*, 2 June 2015, Lot. 190, which states: 'Robin Gibson remembered this work and identified it as being the one probably from the *Australian Irresistibles, 1930–1970* exhibition in 1970. The show had been curated by Alannah Coleman whilst she spent a year in Australia working at the Bonython Gallery. Although not illustrated the description, dimensions and medium are the same.'

<sup>51</sup> Donald-Bradley, 1988.

going to deprive him of it.’<sup>52</sup> While the openings brought a vast array of people with different interests and involvement in art together,<sup>53</sup> for Coleman they remained an ‘open slather ... an appalling mess’.<sup>54</sup>

When she took up management of the gallery it was the beginning of the show season and Bonython had lined up a number of large exhibitions, including solo shows by Brett Whiteley (June–July 1970) and Ken Reinhard (July–August 1970). Coleman did, however, manage to curate a few exhibitions of her own. The first of these was an exhibition of paintings by the French/Hungarian artist Victor Vasarely (1908–1997) arranged through Coleman’s contacts with the Parisian art dealer Denise René. A small upstairs room made an ideal gallery space for Vasarely’s geometric abstract paintings, and invited guests included Patrick White, Hal Missingham and the architect Harry Seidler. All the paintings were sold in a short space of time. Another project was the large survey show: *Australian Irresistibles 1930–1970*. Held between August and September 1970, it was the first exhibition of its kind to be staged by a commercial gallery in Australia.<sup>55</sup> For this exhibition, Coleman set out to survey four decades of modern Australian painting and sculpture with an exhibition of 130 works by 128 different artists. She wrote of her aim ‘to show some of the artists who have contributed to the development of modern Australian painting and sculpture.’<sup>56</sup> The high point of Coleman’s curatorial career in Britain had been *Australian Painting and Sculpture in Europe Today* (1963), a survey exhibition in which she had brought together contemporary Australian artists working in Europe in terms that suggest a historical development. In *Australian Irresistibles*, Coleman was still thinking of ‘Australian art’ in much the same terms: as a ‘cohesive national entity’ rather than as a group of disparate individual artists making diverse and varied work. *Australian Irresistibles* purported to be a retrospective survey of the ‘modern period’ in Australian art, a period that had ‘started about 1930 with the influence of the Paris school, brought back to Australia by the late George Bell and others’<sup>57</sup> and yet, of the 130 works listed and dated in the catalogue, only 6 paintings were painted before

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<sup>52</sup> White, 1976.

<sup>53</sup> *National Times*, 1976.

<sup>54</sup> Donald-Bradley, 1988.

<sup>55</sup> *Australian Irresistibles*, 1970.

<sup>56</sup> *Australian Irresistibles*, 1970.

<sup>57</sup> *Australian Irresistibles*, 1970.

World War II.<sup>58</sup> The top-heavy curation included a sizeable quota of very recent works all painted in the year of the exhibition,<sup>59</sup> and a predominance of contemporary works that, most likely, evidenced Coleman's attempt to reconcile her aim for a broader survey exhibition with Bonython, who wanted his gallery to be a commercial showcase for contemporary art. Twenty-five of the artists selected for the show were living in Europe,<sup>60</sup> underlining Coleman's strong allegiance to expatriate Australian art, and many of the painters from the 1950s to mid-1960s (Blackman, Daws, Gleghorn, Hessing, Hodgkinson, James, Lemprière, Lymburner, Rowell) were artists whom Coleman knew well from her London days and had been associated with her London gallery.<sup>61</sup> The exhibition catalogue gives no indication as to how the work was displayed; however accommodating the generous the spaces of the Bonython Gallery, *Australian Irresistibles* must have presented an eclectic and disparate selection of sculpture, small works on paper and at least one huge acrylic painting (William Delafield Cook's *Vista*, 1970) covering 60 square feet of canvas.

In terms of critical response, Robert Drew, for *The Australian*, described *Australian Irresistibles* as 'the most comprehensive exhibition of Australian art ever held in a private gallery.'<sup>62</sup> Lenore Nicklin, for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, who attended the exhibition opening, concentrated more on the artists themselves than on their artworks. She noted how 'the artists almost outnumbered the rest', their ages ranging from the twenty-five-year-old Martin Collocott to the eighty-five-year-old Desiderius Orban.<sup>63</sup> She remarked on the presence of Albert Tucker, Phyllis Waterhouse and John Serle who had all flown up from Melbourne for the occasion. 'Martin Sharp wore patchwork velvet pants, red sweater, royal blue corduroy jacket and black velour

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<sup>58</sup> Sam Atyeo's *Organised Line* (c.1934), George Bell's *Nude* (1932), Rah Fizelle's *Construction II* (c.1939), Adrian Lawlor's *Flowers* (c.1934), Hal Missingham's *May Trees, Essex* (1933) and Eric Wilson's *Laneway in Arras, France* (1937).

<sup>59</sup> The 1970 works were: Brian Dunlop's *Inside*; Barrie Goodard's *Space Series – Solar Split*; Elaine Haxton's *Jupiter*; Paul Jones's *Trobriand Jungle*; Col Jordan's *Uncloud 3* and *Bow*; Robert Juniper's *Ruined Building Riverbank*; Mike Kitching's *Sidekick*; Colin Lanceley's *Salome – Dance of the Seven Veils*; Stanislaus Rapotec's *Hephaestus*; Ken Reinhard's *707*; Orest Tarnawsky's *Steel Construction I*; Phyl Waterhouse's *Evening Picnic (Grandmother Series)*; Bryan Westwood's *The Cliff*, and Brett Whiteley's *Kookaburra*.

<sup>60</sup> Nicklin, 1970.

<sup>61</sup> Coleman's allegiance to her Australian expatriate friends in London is further borne out by her plan (never realised) to stage a joint exhibition of paintings by Tony Underhill and sculpture by Oliffe Richmond at Bonython's gallery. Neither artist was well known in Australia and their careers began and ended in England.

<sup>62</sup> Drewe, 1970.

<sup>63</sup> The youngest exhibitor was actually 19-year-old sculpture student Orest Tarnawsky.

hat but, much to the chagrin of the P.R. girl, arrived too late for the photographers.<sup>64</sup> Albert Tucker, who arrived at the gallery to see his *Armoured Faun* prominently displayed in the main court, described it as a 'tremendous exhibition ... an exhibition which reasserts the national tradition in painting.'<sup>65</sup> 'Manhattan plexi-glass is a fine medium of expression for Manhattan', he went on, 'but it's great to see an exhibition of the Australian tradition, emphasising the continuity of our painting.' Most of the other artists were reluctant to talk either about their own work or that of others. Only one person ventured to comment about the works on display: 'I find most of them entirely resistible', she said.<sup>66</sup>

Another of Coleman's contributions to her year at Bonython's was the hosting of the 1970 Transfield Art Prize. This bi-annual event, inaugurated in 1961 by industrialist and arts patron Franco Belgiorno-Nettis (1915–2006), had become the biggest acquisitive art prize in Australia and was attracting enormous interest within the art world. Coleman made the well-intentioned decision to invite British critic Sir Roland Penrose (1900–1984) to Australia to judge the prize. In Britain, he was a respected authority on modern European art, especially Surrealism, and a close friend of Picasso, but he had little knowledge of Australian art and, moreover, disagreed on principle with art competitions (especially acquisitive art prizes). Initially he proposed dividing a share of the prize money amongst all the artists, but when pressed he awarded the prize to Bill Clements for *Reading for August 6<sup>th</sup>*, a decision that 'went down like a lead balloon' and almost caused a punch up.<sup>67</sup>

### **The gallery as theatre**

Had Alannah Coleman taken over the management of one of the smaller dealer galleries she would undoubtedly have fared much better than she did at Bonython's. She failed to recognise the gallery's potential as a *theatre for art*—a testing ground for ideas not unlike the ICA in London, an institution that she knew well. Brett Whiteley's phenomenal solo shows at Bonython's (1968/9, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975) exploited the full potential of 10,000 square feet of gallery space—a space that Whiteley filled, decorated, orchestrated, and stage-managed before taking centre-

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<sup>64</sup> Nicklin, 1970.

<sup>65</sup> Drewe, 1970.

<sup>66</sup> Drewe, 1970.

<sup>67</sup> Donald-Bradley, 1988.

stage himself—like a bower bird in his arena—in ‘flowing creamy robes and golden curls’.<sup>68</sup> The ‘open slather’ openings that Coleman so deplored have in retrospect proved a far more significant landmark in Sydney’s cultural life than most of the exhibitions that took place during her brief tenure at Bonython’s. Whiteley’s openings were ‘highly sophisticated contrived show-biz events [in which people] were asked to communicate with the space as well as the paintings.’<sup>69</sup> They were not ‘happenings’—as they have sometimes been described—but a synesthetic experience of artworks, light and sound in which the audience were invited spectators. Reviewing Whiteley’s untitled and uncatalogued 1970 show, John Tranter described:

a three-ring exhibition of paintings, sculptures, stuffed animals, flashing lights, poems, clocks, photographs, music, quotes from famous poets and philosophical reflections revolv[ing] in an eccentric orbit around a number of key preoccupations: what people do to their environment, what people’s environments do to them, where the artist stands in relation to his society, and just which set of muscles an artist can use to belabour those about him.<sup>70</sup>

The exhibition included the first showing of *The American Dream* (1968–69), a huge multi-paneled work that Bonython had paid \$2000 to ship from New York. As a biting critique of American society, Marlborough Fine Art had refused to show it in New York and it failed to find a buyer in Sydney.<sup>71</sup> There is a note of deprecation in Tranter’s review of Whiteley’s attempts at didacticism and social comment, the lines of handwriting in his paintings, ‘often of heavily philosophical intent’, and the written section of the show entitled ‘Raves’; but it was clear to everyone who saw this exhibition that Whiteley was trying to do more than simply sell paintings. Throughout the evening he maintained an enigmatic silence,<sup>72</sup> whilst guests, deafened by the ‘overproduced cacophony’ of noise (described as ‘a sound like a million cicadas pierc[ing] the eardrums’) were unable to make themselves heard but bought Whiteley’s paintings nonetheless.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Hilton & Blundell, 1996, p. 87.

<sup>69</sup> Hilton & Blundell, 1996, p. 86.

<sup>70</sup> Tranter, 1970.

<sup>71</sup> Hilton & Blundell, 1996, p. 89.

<sup>72</sup> Hopkirk, 1996, p. 191.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas, 1976, pp.310–311. See also Tranter, 1970 and Heathcote, 2016, pp.252–254.

***I want to leave a nice well-done child here***

Alannah Coleman had observed how the Bonython Gallery was really too large for any of Bonython's artists, apart from Brett Whiteley, to fill the space with a solo exhibition, and that the consequent three or four concurrent shows running in the gallery were often ill-matched or randomly grouped. Even the *Australian Irresistables* show that Coleman curated during her year at Bonython's lacked the vision and foresight that she had shown with *Australian Painting and Sculpture in Europe Today* in Britain in 1963, imbalanced as it was at the top-end, with work seemingly included at Bonython's request. What was needed was an independent curator to work with the space along the lines of a public gallery. This opportunity eventually came in 1971 in the form of the second Kaldor Public Art Project. Kaldor invited the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann (1933–2005) to Australia in April 1971 when he visited art museums and artists' studios in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney to select twenty-two young artists for the exhibition *I want to leave a nice well-done child here*.<sup>74</sup> Szeemann, whose first major appointment was as the director of Kunsthalle Bern at the precociously young age of twenty-eight, has been described as a 'prophetic activist ... a kind of dowser of artistic energy.'<sup>75</sup> The exhibition that he put together at Bonython's ran from 29 April to 13 May and has since become a landmark in Australia's history of art curatorship. It included work by many of the rising stars in Australian art at that time, such as Tim Johnson and Mike Parr, and it completely filled the Bonython Gallery, including the courtyard. Brett Whiteley made a piece in collaboration with William Pigeon and Tony Woods.<sup>76</sup> When it opened, *I want to leave a nice well-done child here* was proclaimed by art critic James Gleeson to be of great significance: 'it presents the conceptual artist's point of view', he wrote, 'as decisively and with as much impact as the now famous *Field* exhibition's presentation of abstract minimalism in 1968'.<sup>77</sup> Following its showing at Bonython Gallery, the

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<sup>74</sup> The twenty-two artists in the Sydney exhibition were: John Armstrong, Tony Bishop, Robert Boynes, Gunter Christmann, Tony Coleing, Aleks Danko, Margaret Dodd, Neil Evans, Ross Grounds, Dale Hickey, Tim Johnson, Peter Kennedy, Warren Knight, Nigel Lendon, Ian Milliss, Ti Parks, Mike Parr (who also designed the invitation), Guy Stuart and Alec Tzannes, William Pidgeon, Brett Whiteley and Tony Woods. See Art Gallery of New South Wales: 'Harald Szeemann', *Art Gallery of New South Wales*,

[http://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/archived/2010/kaldor\\_projects/projects/1971\\_harald\\_szeemann/](http://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/archived/2010/kaldor_projects/projects/1971_harald_szeemann/); accessed June 3, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Birnbaum, 2005.

<sup>76</sup> Entitled *Linked Portrait*, it comprised a painted triptych in oil, collage and pen and ink on board (203 x 289.5 cm) and panel of photographs (203.5 x 75 cm).

<sup>77</sup> *Sydney Sun*, 1971, p. 47.

exhibition moved to the National Gallery of Victoria where it became 'the first major conceptual show [to be held] in an Australian museum'.<sup>78</sup>

### **Epilogue: the gallery as white elephant**

Szeemann's choice of the Bonython Gallery as an arena for collaborative, mainly conceptual art was, without question, the best use a curator or gallerist could make of Bonython's 10,000 square feet of exhibition space. But when, after just two weeks, the exhibition had relocated to Melbourne, Bonython was once more faced with the problem of how to make the gallery pay for itself.<sup>79</sup> Alannah Coleman had been unsuccessful in her bid to make Bonython's gallery a financial success because the management style she sought to impose there was unsuited to the 1970s Australian market, and her deference to British standards and expertise had proved irksome to staff, artists and Kym Bonython alike. However, evidence shows that, while in London during the early to mid-1960s, Coleman had demonstrated a commitment to experimental avant-garde art through her association with Signals Gallery. Why, as a curator, she chose not to sustain or develop this commitment during her year at Bonython's remains a matter for debate. Perhaps it was the imperative to get the gallery on a firm financial footing and to prove her worth to Bonython that caused her to play safe; but shows like *Australian Irresistibles*, curated along the lines of group exhibitions she had put together in Britain six or seven years earlier, were no longer of much interest in Australia, or for that matter, in Britain either. Coleman was without a financial partner (married or otherwise) to help set her up in business in Australia as the owner of a small commercial gallery, where, almost certainly, she would have had a successful career. Belatedly, she tried to persuade Arthur Boyd and a number of other artist friends to make a financial commitment towards buying her a small gallery and living space, but, frustrated by their slow progress, she left for London in early January 1971.

Admittedly, the shows curated after Coleman's departure by her successor Bronwyn

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<sup>78</sup> For the NGV exhibition in Melbourne (4 June–4 July 1971), Mike Brown was added as an additional exhibitor and some artists made new works. See Art Gallery of New South Wales: 'Harald Szeemann', *Art Gallery of New South Wales*, [http://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/archived/2010/kaldor\\_projects/projects/1971\\_harald\\_szeemann/](http://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/archived/2010/kaldor_projects/projects/1971_harald_szeemann/); accessed June 3, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> In 1976, Bonython estimated that, just in order to cover expenses, the gallery had to sell around \$40,000 worth of art every month. See Ingram, 1976.

Thomas (wife of art critic Laurie Thomas) were no more viable in financial terms, comprising as they did of 'cutting edge but frequently unsaleable art'.<sup>80</sup> When Bronwyn Thomas left the gallery in 1974, Bonython moved his family from Adelaide to Paddington and took over the reins again with Robin Gibson as principal assistant, but the gallery finally closed towards the end of 1976. It was sold at auction to John Singleton as the new premises for the advertising agency Doyle Dane Bernbach, whilst Gibson opened his own gallery in Paddington, taking Brett Whiteley, James Willebrant and Neil Taylor with him.

In the final analysis, the closure of the Bonython Gallery in 1976 was due partly to its confused identity, and partly to the sheer size of the gallery itself.<sup>81</sup> Interventions such as Szeemann's *I want to leave a nice well-done child here* undoubtedly made the best possible use of Bonython's gallery, which was as a testing ground for experimental art. The fact that this exhibition went on to show at the National Gallery of Victoria surely suggests that the Bonython Gallery had more potential as a public exhibition space than as a commercial gallery. The distinction that Bonython himself liked to make between commercial dealer galleries, and the 'exhibitor gallery' that he believed his Sydney gallery to be, needs justifying. Was he in it for the money, or not? And if not, where was the regular source of income needed to run such a big gallery to come from, if not from a government subsidy of some kind? Bonython reflected:

I suspect the dealer galleries, as opposed to the exhibitor galleries, as we are, don't have the promotional expenses of presenting younger artists. A gallery like mine has always depended on exhibiting people who inevitably are uneconomic for the first few years of their careers. ... if you have a small gallery, when things are financially a little difficult you can pull your belt in and cut some corners. Well, you can cut only a certain number of corners in a place like this.<sup>82</sup>

Bonython's style of dealing has also been given as one of the reasons for the failure of his Sydney gallery. Terry Ingram describes how the more aggressive type of art dealer like Barry Stern fared much better in Sydney than an establishment figure like

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<sup>80</sup> Ingram, 1976.

<sup>81</sup> White, 1976.

<sup>82</sup> White, 1976.

Bonython, with his slightly aloof, patrician air:

It is often forgotten that it was Kym who discovered perhaps the most popular and saleable of living Australian artists, Kevin Pro Hart. However, it is unlikely that Bonython has done anything like as well out of selling this artist as Barry Stern. Indeed, Stern seems to have run rings around Kym Bonython as a dealer, seizing on Bonython discoveries and marking up the prices.<sup>83</sup>

Bonython's style of dealing was not the only factor though. His personality—his addiction to the adrenaline-rush of speed car racing, flying, submarine diving, jazz music and the high-octane life is also reflected in his approach to art dealing which, for Bonython, was another kind of chase, a game of chance, a race to spot the next winner. It was almost as if the money didn't matter. In Bonython's own words, it was more about 'spotting the next "gem"—you'd kick yourself if you missed it.' Timing and location were also against him—the 1970s Australian art boom had peaked just at the moment when he had made his biggest investment in it, and Bonython's decision to live in Adelaide and do business in Sydney, at least until 1974, meant that he missed out on valuable opportunities.<sup>84</sup> Artist Fred Williams, whose own dealer was Rudy Komon, once described the Bonython Gallery as having 'a great racetrack but no horses'.<sup>85</sup> Even the most successful artists in Bonython's stable—Brett Whiteley and Tim Storrier—sold as well, or even better, through the Australian Galleries in Melbourne than they did in Bonython's own.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ingram, 1976.

<sup>84</sup> In 1974 Bonython moved his family into a small terrace house next to the Gallery. See *The Australian*, 1974.

<sup>85</sup> 'Alannah is not happy trying to run Kym's gallery in Sydney "a great race track but no horses" is still true of it—and she knows it. Bert [Tucker] had apparently given her a thorough going over during the weekend and she was feeling pretty well down. Rudy had been to see her (presumably to price one of my paintings she has) and it is the first time he has been in Kym's office. I suspect it will all finish up with Kym sacking A[lannah].' Fred William's diary entry, 30 March 1970. I am grateful to Lyn Williams for providing me with this extract.

<sup>86</sup> See Heathcote, 2016, pp.253–254; also Ingram, 1976.

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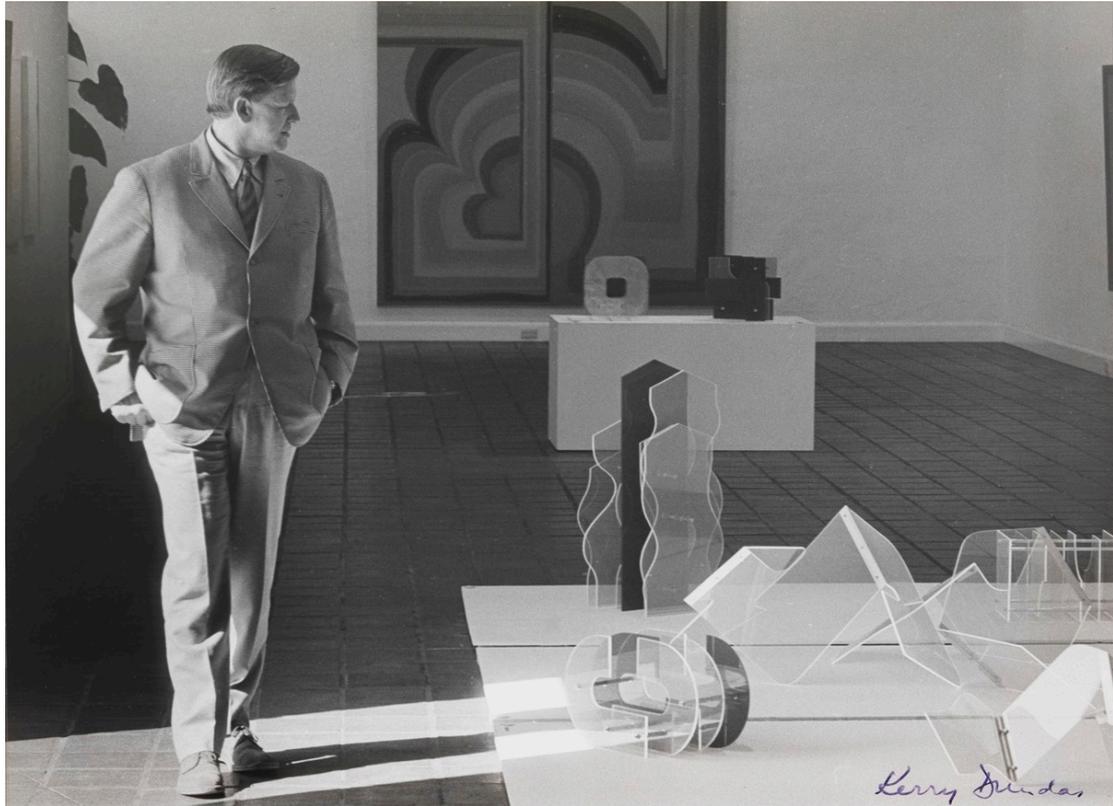
\*All the references to newspaper articles were sourced from a photocopied book of cuttings on Kym Bonython, held at the National Library of Australia. In most cases, these clippings did not include page numbers, so for the sake of consistency, I have omitted page numbers when I am quoting from these newspaper cuttings.

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