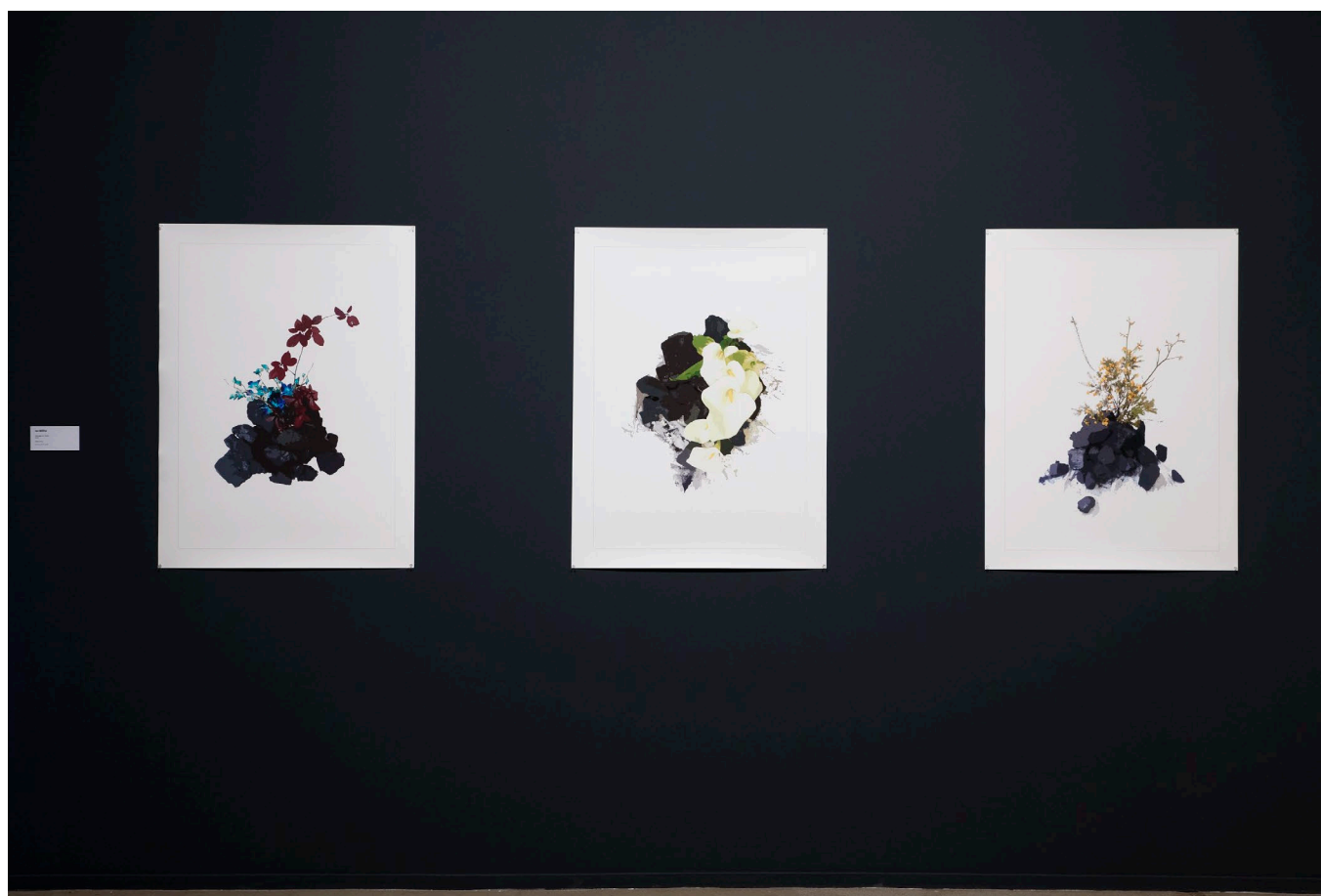


Ian Milliss: Notes on the Works

by Chloé Wolifson

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Ian Milliss: Notes on the Works

In the text accompanying his work *Homage to Tatlin* (2013), Ian Milliss remarks that ‘sometimes the most defiant act is obedience’.¹ The story of Milliss’ practice is not one of obedience (after all, to instigate cultural change is to disobey the rules of the day), however its latest chapter brings this declaration to the fore. Milliss was well known as an artist in the generally accepted sense, beginning as a teenager in the 1960s (making necessarily modular paintings from his small bedroom at his family home in Sydney’s then working class suburb of Matraville, for exhibition at the influential Central Street Gallery),² through to the 1970s when his participatory conceptual works caught the eye of the likes of legendary curator Harald Szeemann.³ Then, in the early 1970s, Milliss’ focus shifted to cultural activism and he began working closely with the Trade Union movement and various media organisations.⁴ In response to those within art institutions who often ask Milliss why he ‘left’ the art world, he declares that he never stopped making art but rather found more effective avenues through which to pursue cultural change.⁵ Now he has returned, more Dennis the Menace than Prodigal Son, to again use the art world as the means through which to deliver his message.

Milliss’ Artspace project was not simply a survey exhibition or retrospective, those tried and true exhibition formats positioned to inform the audience as to how prescient a senior artist’s practice now seems when viewed with twenty-twenty hindsight (although there were certainly shades of that in the description on Artspace’s exhibition collateral accompanying the exhibition).⁶ Not one to conceal his motives, Milliss wanted *Notes on the Works* to draw a line between the use of, and participation in, art institutions. The problem, as he sees it, is that the art world, like most institutions, is reluctant to bend to cultural change, becoming as susceptible as any other entity to cultural stagnation and capitalist complicity.⁷

As such, *Notes on the Works* was Milliss’ method of using a significant Sydney art institution in the only way he saw conscionable – as a vault and archive with which to hold and protect the work of previous cultural change agents. Writ large on the wall of Artspace during *Notes on the Works* was the declaration:

As we adapt to face climate disaster the self-serving fake culture manufactured by cultural institutions – easily handled entertaining tradable artefacts – could provide an adaptable format to preserve the patterns of cultural memes. And the institutions themselves could regain relevance in an older role as cultural seed banks preserving cultural memes for later reconstruction and revival.

Crucially, the exhibition was also an interrogation by Milliss of his previous and continuing relevance as an instigator of cultural change. Visitors to the exhibition were immediately diverted by a temporary wall placed at the entrance. This structure forced people to enter the gallery space on either the left or right (immediately confounding habit for those familiar with Artspace), but not before examining the exhibition’s namesake work that was presented centrally in the doorway. *Notes on the works* (1970) consisted of the conceptualist device of a paper ‘art form’ on which Milliss states:

Make a complete catalogue of all the recent works, containing all the relevant information, plus comments and interpretations, experiences and other works from which each one is inspired, and other works by both myself and others which might be relevant to their understanding.

These instructions, taken over four decades later, serve as a mission statement for the exhibition itself. Their format also acts as a prototype for the instructional prints which accompanied each work in the show like expanded

exhibition labels. The prints contained notes on the original context for each work, guidance for their recreation, images of the piece and reproductions of ephemera, wittily making use of a database design containing fields for title, date, medium, keywords and so on – a method of understanding art all too familiar for many an art administrator. (The twist in the tail here is that the artist himself has supported his practice by working as a computerised database consultant for clients including art galleries).⁸

Several of Milliss' early conceptual works were included in the show and foregrounded the possible difficulties to be had by art institutions past and present in exhibiting these examples of what now could be deemed relational aesthetics. *Circular Tug of War* (1971) was accompanied by an account of the work's inclusion in an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in 1971, and how its requirement of at least three participants encouraged a breakdown of traditional audience roles, problems for gallery invigilators, and ultimately resulted in the disappearance of the original object from the NGV.⁹ Another early piece, *Walk Along This Line* (1970) is an instructional participatory work consisting of a line of masking tape placed on the floor almost flush to the wall. The original piece of masking tape was returned to Milliss by his gallerist following its exhibition in the early 1970s. This absurd action seems to illustrate the art world's preoccupation with the preciousness of the art object. The exhibition *Notes on the Works* attempted to dissolve this attitude through Milliss' foregrounding of instructions to viewers on how to remake the object or reactivate the work in other ways. However, even within the gallery walls of Artspace some forty years later, the works still appeared closer to artefact than activity, and in this author's observation viewers tended to observe the works and read the wall texts rather than directly interact with the works, indicating the pervasiveness of institutionalised art world behaviours.

A more recent work, *The Murdering Stools* (2008), encapsulated a more ideological intent behind this approach to remaking. Fundamental to this work and its potentiality for restaging are two elements – the central joint design of

the stool, and the re-use of materials from now-redundant technologies. Milliss writes in the accompanying poster that if this work is to be remade it must retain these two elements in order to contain the artist's original intention. He concedes that the stools could be manufactured to the same format using new materials but that this would basically defeat their function of contributing to a culture of reuse and recycling. In other works in the show however, Milliss acknowledges and accepts the occasional difficulty to be found in playing out this restaging strategy. His *Strip Paintings* (1968) work was exhibited at Artspace alongside a set of instructions (again on a poster), and a number of examples by artists invited to follow those instructions to produce new versions of the work. Milliss conceded that his own *Untitled (Strip Painting)* (1968) was the only one to adhere to the given instructions. The other artists appeared to have torn canvas into the instructed 250 millimetre width, and subsequently reinterpreted, ignored or misunderstood the other given instructions (each strip to be painted with only one colour and stapled directly onto the wall), thus 'demonstrating perfectly how cultural change occurs'.¹⁰ The invited artists also titled their own works – one version, produced by Beata Geyer in collaboration with eleven other artists is called *LEMON* (2013), perhaps acknowledging not only its yellow colour but also its technical failure to fulfil Milliss' instructional brief. Nonetheless, the invitation extended to a selection of artists to respond to his early practice, and in turn his interrogation of the results, is significant in defining *Notes on the Works* as more than just a survey exhibition. Milliss incorporated historical and contemporary interpretations of his work into the exhibition as a marker of its potential successes and failures – in a theatrical sense availing him of 'notes' on the works.

Notes on the Works included examples of Milliss' own role in collaborative activity, in particular *The City Squatter* (1974) and *Trade Union Publication* (1979-80), journals of the Green Ban and Trade Union movements respectively. Milliss clarified that he was only responsible for some elements of these journals, yet considered the exhibition platform partially as an opportunity to preserve their content for future reference.¹¹ He mused that 'the newspaper represents the





true status of artworks, not ends in themselves but rather the tools and by-products of cultural change processes.¹² Technological development is a profound indicator of changing times, and although these newspapers recorded a significant part of Milliss' artistic practice, he has readily adapted the use of new media to suit his purposes. *Whatever you came looking for you won't find it here (#2)* (2013) comprised a text cloud of domain names owned by Milliss. These encompassed all manner of concepts, ranging from his and his wife's names, through to current, failed and mothballed projects. This was the closest resemblance to a self-portrait to be found in the exhibition, reflecting a great deal about the artist's work, interests, and drive to pursue a multitude of expected and unexpected avenues to achieve cultural change.

From the outset of his artistic practice, Ian Milliss has worked to collapse the pillars of the traditional art establishment by undermining the preciousness of the object, the singular artistic vision rooted in ego, and the sacredness of the viewing experience, and by association, the art institutions that provide for it. *Notes on the Works* sought to demonstrate that out of this negation it is possible to find an alternative approach to changing and building culture through interrogation, collaboration and play. The object can be remade, text can be archived online, and the audience can become an active participant within the gallery and outside it. However, it could be argued that the notion of the gallery as a hallowed place moderating interaction with the world has not been entirely overcome; establishments and institutions endure due to the complexity of all parties. Milliss understands this – the question is whether the audience does also.

NOTES

1. Ian Milliss exhibition text for *Homage to Tatlin*, 2013
2. Ian Milliss in conversation with the author at Artspace, 23 November 2013; see also Wendy Carlson, 'Ian Milliss: the invisible artist', <http://www.ianmilliss.com/text/textindex.htm> [accessed January 2014]
3. Ian Milliss, *Notes on the Works*, exhibition room notes, 2013
4. Ian Milliss, 'Why stuff doesn't matter', lecture given at College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sm7ewgKlQc> [accessed 10 January 2014]
5. Ian Milliss, 'Shoot for the head', *Art Monthly*, issue 250, June 2012, p. 5
6. 'Notes on the Works is a major survey exhibition of historically important and continuously influential artist Ian Milliss', from Ian Milliss: *Notes on the Works* exhibition page, Artspace website, pub. 2013 [accessed 10 January 2014] http://www.artspace.org.au/gallery_project.php?i=187
7. Ian Milliss, 'Shoot for the head', p. 5
8. Ian Milliss, 'Why stuff doesn't matter'
9. Ian Milliss exhibition text for *Circular tug of war*, 1971
10. Ian Milliss exhibition text for *Strip Paintings*, 1968
11. Ian Milliss in conversation with Wendy Bacon, Hon Dr Meredith Burgmann, Dr Kurt Iveson and Stacey Miers, Public Talk: Victoria Street, Squatting & Gentrification, Artspace Sydney, 23 November 2013
12. Ian Milliss exhibition text for *The City Squatter* (1974)

Chloé Wolifson is an independent writer and curator. She has developed a number of curatorial projects in Sydney, has written for a range of Australian visual art publications and is currently a board member of Runway Australian Experimental Art. From 2007 to 2013 she was gallery manager at Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.



IMAGES

PAGE 1: Ian Milliss, *Notes on the Works*, 1970, documentation of the artist's original research materials

PAGE 2: Ian Milliss, *Notes on the Works*, 2012, installation view

Ian Milliss, *Homage to Tatlin*, 2013, digital prints, installation view

PAGE 5: Ian Milliss and Sydney Non Objective Group, *Strip Paintings*, series, 1968-2014, installation view, Artspace, Sydney

Ian Milliss, *Strip Paintings*, 1968, acrylic on canvas
Billy Gruner and Sarah Keighery (Sydney Non Objective Group), *Anthrocyan Installation*, 2013, mixed media

Beata Geyer (with Louise Blyton, Margaret Rooney & Jess Davis, Jacqueline Spedding, Kayo Yokoyama, James Culkin, Jane Lennon, Lizzy Marshall, Margaret Roberts, Hans & Lorraine Romeyn, Emma Rooney), *LEMON (Ian Millis Project)*, 2013, canvas, acrylic paint, thread, paper, rope

Fiona Davies, *Blood on Silk: As per Instructions*, 2013, paint and fabric

Fleur MacDonald, *Folded Memory*, 2013, floor piece, canvas with rayon thread

PAGE 6: Ian Milliss, *The City Squatter*, 1974, digital prints and Ian Milliss, *Trade Union Publication*, 1979-80, digital print installation view, Artspace, Sydney,

Ian Milliss, *Untitled Painting*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, wood; *Notes on the Works*, digitally printed reproduction of the artist's original source materials, 1970; *The Snow Queen's Table*, 2008, wood.

PAGE 8: Ian Milliss, *Walk Along This Line*, 1970, masking tape

Ian Milliss, *Circular Tug of War*, 1971, cotton and masking tape

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