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Ian Milliss' big come back

Conceptual artist and cultural activist Ian Milliss returns with back-to-back exhibitions at Artspace and the AGNSW.

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Installation view Notes on Works, Artspace Sydney. Image ArtsHub

Ian Milliss is an artist who has consistently searched for ways of increasing art's capacity for social transformation. His major survey exhibition, *Notes on the Works*, opened at Sydney's Artspace this week, and is extended through the presentation of Ian Milliss and Lucas Ihlein's *The Yeomans Project* at the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW), to open 26 November.

Simply, these exhibitions are historically rich.

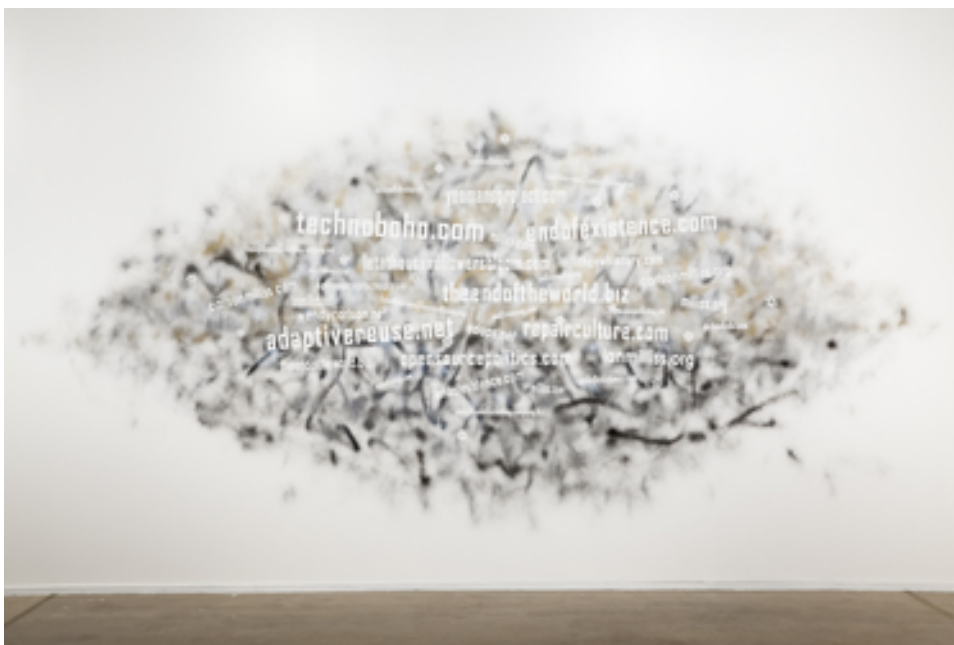
Walking into Artspace, the exhibition has all the edge you would expect, but its pristine presentation snuffs out any rawness. The exhibition journeys through Milliss' conceptual propositions from the late 1960s, with their rigorous reaction to Greenbergian formalism, to more contemporary communications from community art projects, environmentalism, trade union movements and cultural activism.

The early instructional works have been restaged – at times by members of the Sydney Non-Objective group – with each presented with a digitised documentation that drags them into the 21st century formatted like an academic research paper with a description, realisation, keywords and a QR code. Artspace has described them as 'art and social history displays'.

Among them was one of Milliss' best-known pieces, *Walk Along This Line*, a line of masking tape on the floor and letraset lettering nominating two points. The work; however, is the instruction and the audience's reaction, contemporaneous with performance art. It was produced for the 1970 Transfield Prize, an invitation only prize and most valuable at the time and precursor to the Biennale of Sydney, and is attributed as one of the earliest examples of relational aesthetics.

Milliss' interest 'in the clash between illusion and reality as well as a concern with the physical properties of space and materiality and their ability to provoke responses from viewers' during the late-1960s and early-1970s, is as potent and reactive today.

Milliss is a fascinating artist, not only for the work but for the way he has weaved actions and activism into the perception of creative encounter and production. The later part of his career saw him culturally involved in other works, in particular the trade union movement, environmentalism and blogging, which saw him actively move away from the formal structures of the art world yet remain continuously influential in its development. It could be argued that the physical work largely slipped from view for many years, and in that Milliss consistently challenges the role of the artist in society.



A series of reproduced posters and papers document this chapter of Milliss' career, extending to a new aerosol and vinyl wall text work *Whatever you Came Looking for You Won't Find it Here (#2)* (2013) (pictured above), and indeed offer a segway to his installation at the AGNSW. This survey exhibition pays testament to that range of activities, in what could be described as a dynamic come-back duo.

Sitting somewhere between eco-art, personal research and pure data, The Yeomans Project is based on the figure of Australian inventor and agriculturalist PA Yeomans. The AGNSW describes: 'Although never calling himself an artist, Yeoman explored ideas like 'environment', 'education' and 'participation', which have since become significant discourses in contemporary art.' He consciously set out to change the cultural understanding of the Australian landscape. The Gallery added: 'The Yeomans Project, not only challenges the artist's role within this undertaking but repositions Milliss and Ihlien's art as secondary to the work of Yeomans himself.'

The Yeoman Project

Important to Milliss's practice has been dialogue and the agitation of thought. Both the AGNSW and Artspace will feature a number of public discussions that will 'address key issues that have informed and directed Milliss' socially engaged practice over the last forty years'.

The Yeomans Project is part of the Art Gallery of NSW Contemporary Projects series and can be viewed 28 November 2013 to 27 January 2014. Artspace's show will continue through 8 December.