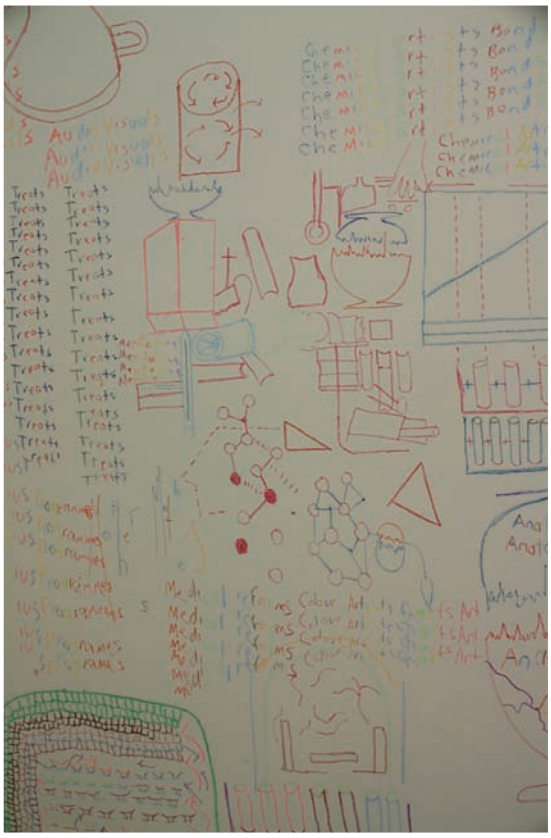
Callan Park Gallery
For Self-Taught and Outsider Art

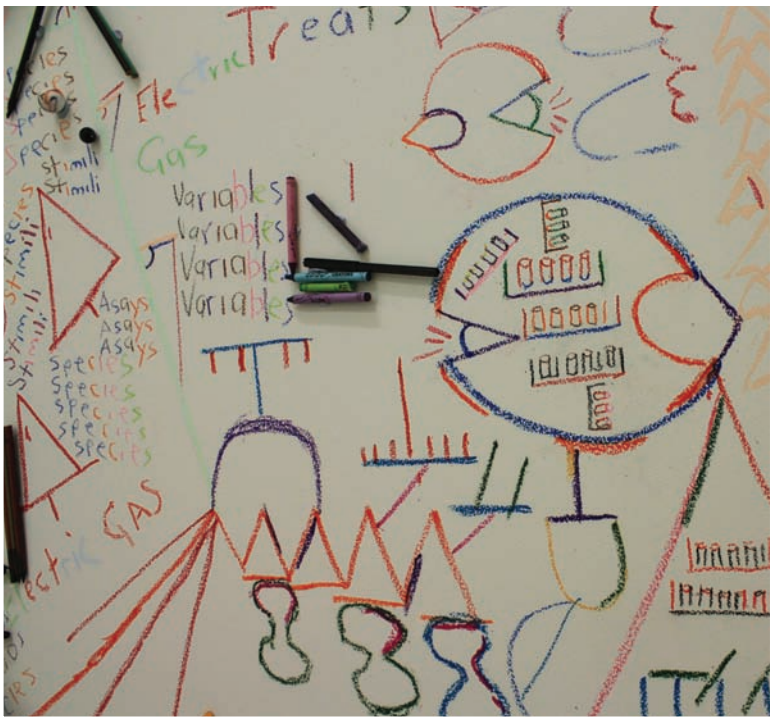
John Demos
Curated by Nerida Olson and Kristina Tito



Anyone even only casually aware of the state of outsider art at this point in its history would be aware that it is coming under increasing scrutiny. The criteria and connotations historically implied by the term are being tested for their validity. While there are those who hold the fort, keeping true to the belief that the outsider artist should be a unique visionary isolated from the stifling trends of the art market and 'the mainstream', now, more than ever, the relevance of the term is being seriously questioned, and the boundaries for what defines it broadened.

Of any artist yet exhibited at Callan Park Gallery, Sydney artist John Demos personifies this change most clearly.

Flying in the face of what is traditionally one of the key criteria for outsider status, Demos is a trained artist. For a period of four years in the early 1980s he attended Meadowbank TAFE where he studied ceramics. Importantly, when speaking of this time in his life, it is clear that Demos not only considers his formal education to have been a key factor in the development of his creative practice, but also that the idea of undertaking further tertiary study is highly desirable. While the loosening of the theoretical basis of outsider art has shifted significantly in recent years, allowing into the fold many artists who might previously been excluded, it is still rare to find an artist who has received formal instruction, let alone one intending to undertake further study in the future.



Another subversion of traditional outsider trends that Demos represents can be seen in his subject matter. Outsider artists largely produce work that is quite singular in focus and aesthetic style, and often predicated on a desire to communicate to others their own highly individualised and nuanced thoughts and beliefs. Demos' focus is anything but singular, and he eschews interiority in favour of deliberating on broad and often highly abstract concepts including science, education, the nature of creativity, language and the cosmos. As opposed to the stereotype of the isolated outsider artist grappling with highly personalised subject matter, Demos' discussions of 'big picture' concepts reveal an outwardly focused artist driven by a diverse academic curiosity.

While it is true that since undertaking study in the early 1980s, Demos has not generally moved in the networks and systems of the 'mainstream' art

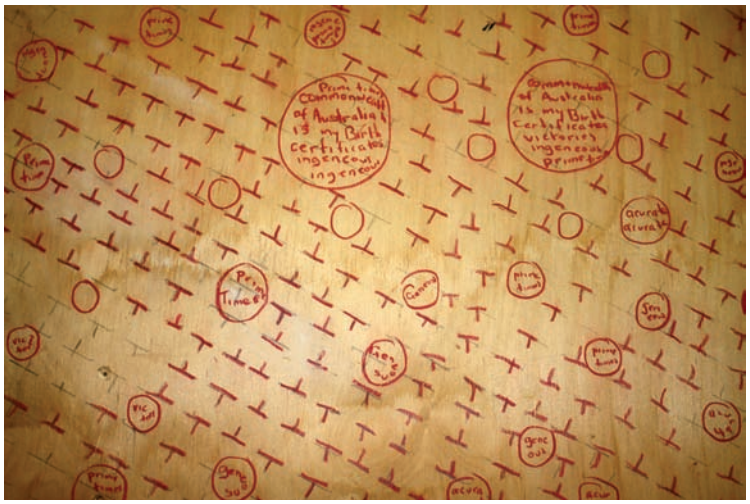
world, he has never been out of touch with art. Since this time, he has unceasingly immersed himself in it through the maintenance of an ongoing and committed practice, and by undertaking the autodidactic processes required of all artists post-graduation, namely the perpetual consumption of art and culture. On any given weekend, you could find him wandering the galleries of the Art Gallery of NSW (where the gallery attendants know him by name), visiting other galleries in the City, taking in the dioramas at the Australian Museum, or visiting any number of other such institutions. Such motivated and consistent dedication to the process of artistic growth and the accumulation of cultural knowledge is, in my experience at least, rarer than you might think.

This immersion and the inevitable influences that it manifests are visible in the discrete aesthetic narratives that make up Demos' body of work. One of these narratives utilises repeated text to develop shape and form in a manner easily connected to concrete poetry, a method by which the written word is used to form visual patterns and images. In another, block colour is used to achieve a blanketing effect similar to the abstract expressionists, or colour field artists.

Beyond his interest in art history, Demos' enthusiasm for the sciences is evident in his layering and repetition of symbols to develop images that appear as schemata or mathematical equations. The installation that fills the second room of the gallery is Demos' first intervention into a formal gallery space, and is also the largest such installation he has undertaken. Much like the scientific processes or intricate machinery that fascinate Demos, on first approach the overwhelming scale of the installation defies immediate comprehension, however, by breaking it down and viewing its components, it becomes evident that each one of these parts is an individual process viewed by Demos to be essential to the overall function of the work.

Callan Park Gallery's decision to include Demos in their programming shows a satisfying enthusiasm for the changes that are afoot in the world of outsider art. This willingness to engage with the spirit of contemporaneity, a state of being characterised by interconnectedness and a multiplicity of relationships, is heartening for those of us who are fascinated by outsider art, but remain acutely aware of its limitations, at least in its traditional forms. It is within the development of this interconnectedness and the convergence of previously separate communities that the future of outsider art rests, and artists such as John Demos will become increasingly important as this process is undertaken.

Hugh Nichols, April 2011



John Demos will be on display to Friday 20 May 2011

Gallery hours: By appointment
For further information please contact:
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