

# under the counter *interview: ken bolton*

## ROBERT COOK

Here's where I interview Ken Bolton. In July last year *Art Writing* was published, a paperback compilation of Bolton's critical writing on art in Adelaide in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>1</sup> The cover is (process) yellow with a black and white of Bolton holding a wine glass close to his chest, his thumb at that soft bit where neck turns to breastbone. Maybe he's at an opening. He's smiling. He has big hair, looks like he could be someone from *The Models*. What else is cool about the cover is that whoever did the design made "art" part of the title small and white and "writing" big and black. The small white "art" almost disappears against the yellow background. It is there as a ghost. To me this forces attention upon the writing before the art that is being written about. Process precedes subject. Now of course, this cannot happen—we all know (sarcasm) that the art kicks the writing into motion. I've always been curious how far written discourse permeates making, how it shapes it, how the desire of the artist is shaped by the desire of the critic (fake Lacanian theorising!). And now, this stuff that can't be known, this precious unknowingness, is right there on the cover! However, on another level Bolton's writing really does precede the art in the title. He is, after all, one of Australia's foremost poets (I can't say famous because, Les Murray aside, 'famous poet' is an oxymoron here), making work alongside the late John Forbes, and the living Laurie Duggan, John Tranter *et al.* He is a writer therefore, and then he is an art writer (though his editorship of *Otis Rush* brought the two together). So the fact that an entire book of art writing had been put out interested me—how was the art to be fashioned in the writing, how was it to follow, how was it to lead? Plus, more generally, I'm always interested in what poets have to say about art and the how of their saying it. I'm far more interested in them than novelists on the subject. When novelists encounter visual art they too often strain for literary effect. Poets don't seem to; they are more pragmatic and searching, less in love with the idea of art to put it on the novelists' pedestal. In doing so, their writing generates thought, doesn't shut it down with fancy phrasing. Plus, there's a neat lineage of poets on art that includes Frank O'Hara, also a curator, and John Ashberry as the most obvious. But the younger American poet Jeremy Sigler writes about art too, and makes it; he's amazing. It's an interesting field. Happily, there's nothing overly literary about Ken's writing on art. And this makes sense because there's nothing overly literary about his poetry either. In fact, he refers to it as nothing but thinking; it is collage and philosophical instead. His art writing is similarly open. It sprawls, lurches. It doesn't seem to know the destination. And to me at least, there's a resulting refusal to polish. I do not get the sense that once he's found where he is wanting to go with a piece that he starts again and sets up the flagposts, makes it all coherent as a whole (that's the way I try to operate). I get the sense that he leaves it alone because the steps are essential to conveying the activity of finding an idea. The result is that we don't really know which trip he's on when we start reading. I might be romantic about it all but that's the poet thing at play, the wanting to find the new thing. Here's where I interview Ken Bolton.

ROBERT COOK: Ken, thanks for agreeing to shoot the breeze—I'm interested in speaking with you for a couple of reasons. One is that your book is Adelaide-specific, and it opens up a range of cultural centre/periphery-type questions that for those of us working in other (admittedly more exotic and gorgeous) far-flung locales remain as relevant as they are desperately unfashionable. The other is that to me you are a 'proper' writer who writes about art. That is, you are not a dour (or, hey! even foppish) 'arts professional' writing for arts professional reasons, to show off to peers, to inhabit the discourse, to get even, to set the record straight, to rack up research points, to get the next job.<sup>2</sup> You write—and this is totally evident in the writing—out of curiosity, not ambition. This makes your writing on art I think different from criticism and art-writing as we typically know it. It makes it also somewhat unique, especially in this country. What say?

KEN BOLTON: I've probably seemed all of those things at various times to people here—dour, foppish, mean-minded, show-off, etcetera. I don't mind showing off, to stay amused, but you are right, none of it was done for professional advancement. I've somehow never been on that ladder. The centre/periphery thing—yes, it's not fashionable—are we whingeing too much? Can it possibly look good? What will change anyway? Those are the things you think, or that Adelaide thinks. Not me. I'm ambivalent about Adelaide, maybe—or is it that my loyalty is just not that deep-rooted? I'm 'Sydney', I just *happen* to be living here. But it's gone on for a long while now, surely. Perth sometimes seems to me saved by its relative isolation, forced to make greater efforts. But this is maybe conjecture.

ROBERT COOK: "Greater efforts" would be a neat title for a Western Australian journal of arts and culture. It would fit. Perth is home to some super above- and under-the-radar artists for whom starting is the easy part, and that's hard enough, but the long haul is like another thing entirely. The complications of those greater efforts are enormous. But let's get back to that. Or, you know, not. For now, maybe fill us in on the Ken Bolton narrative arc, that is, what took you to Adelaide and, just as importantly, why did you stay? What did it offer you as a writer?

KEN BOLTON: I was given a residency at the Experimental Art Foundation in late 1981. After that, part of which involved designing and printing a series of books, the EAF offered me a job as their printer. So, I left Sydney for good. (At the time I was living in Coalcliff, a little north of Wollongong. I was squatting. I had no prospects much, unless I started teaching.) There was not a lot keeping me in Sydney, or so I thought, and I made the move, thinking Funding will flow my way, there are no good poets in Adelaide. I stayed because I made friends very quickly and found a place for myself embedded in the art world. My academic background had been Art History at the University of Sydney, under Donald Brook, Bernard Smith and others. I even knew Noel Sheridan a little, so I was 'connected' with the EAF in any case. (Noel was its first director and Donald, with Noel, was associated with the ideas and attitudes the EAF was built around.) Adelaide is an easily negotiated town and I liked it. I took almost no part in its literary life, but the art scene was genuinely interesting. What Adelaide offered me as a writer was anonymity. It was great at that stage of my life to be operating at a distance from the world of real writing—like a poet in a small country town. Not that Adelaide was that. But, as I say, I didn't persevere with the local writing. And in a contrasting parallel world I was at the centre of a lot of activity, not 'small town' at all, mostly talking and watching and listening. I could be a critical voice in a bubbling art world and, as a writer, be an isolated punter at a long remove from literary centres and from my writer friends.

ROBERT COOK: About this critical voice and its structure. It's a super dumb way of getting at it, but Adelaide seems like a character in your book. Is it? To you, I mean? If so, what characterises him/her for you? What kind of shoes would she wear to an opening? Or better, perhaps, do you have an 'Adelaide of the mind' that shapes things for you as you write, as you walk, as you talk?

KEN BOLTON: I hadn't thought of Adelaide figuring in my critical writing. I suppose it's an entity that one berates, or talks up, or occasionally tries to reassure or to characterise for it to see itself. But I don't have that much leverage here. I don't have a role via which I can speak to Adelaide. I don't want to either. I write for an ideal notional reader, to amuse and interest them and to do it by finding out what I think myself. Compared to other Australian cities, Adelaide is a little older and greyer, a little more Anglo, a little less Irish, a little less Labor and so on. Its art scene is a microcosm that I hardly leave. I don't have much perspective on

it, or distance. In fact I'm in one faction of it, though it sometimes seems a faction of one. I doubt that the art scene (the 'faction', whatever) reflects the city as a whole. The scene here is less pretentious than those of Melbourne or Sydney, but that is purely a function of money. (The more pie there is to divide up the more sniffiness is used to police exclusivities.) And in that respect—the pretention factor—it is interestingly the *opposite* of the East Coast's image of Adelaide, which is usually personified as a chardonnay-quaffing and fluted-toned chatterer. Its art scene is not like that. It does lack argument, I think. Things should be contested more, here, or more openly. But small scenes feel they can't afford it, I guess. Adelaide art tends to be a little cool and is usually thoughtful. There's a whole range of course. But it doesn't often extend to the brashness of Brisbane allows or, unfortunately, the unselfconsciousness that Sydney permits. I think. Australians generally don't vary that much across the continent, not the way in which the Americans or British do. The vowels change a little. But our art is not markedly different from city to city. My point is that these attempts to generalise about city cultures are not that interesting. Adelaide's main problem, culturally, is that it doesn't take itself seriously because Melbourne and Sydney don't attend to it at all, and they constitute 'the national'. Adelaide's own media tends to echo (and thereby internalise) the national media's low opinion of South Australian cultural production. That way their ability to analyse and criticise it remains untested. The main print media here are determinedly parochial and anti-intellectual. National issues and international issues are usually kept well off the front pages in favour of mind-numbing, infantilising dullness.

ROBERT COOK: You seem to work against this in your writing in the way you treat Adelaide very seriously and with a touch of mockery. It's a nice twinning. By serious I mean you don't spend too much time connecting out when you write about an artist. You keep it contained in what they are doing. By this you imply, I believe, that making art in Adelaide is like making it anywhere else. It is an end in itself, not a step somewhere else. It totally, therefore, gets over the cringe thing. And by mockery, you mention *The Big Three* etc., and seem to poke fun at a jockeying for position in the art world. So you both inflate and deflate. Is that how you see it?

KEN BOLTON: All true. As regards centrality, it probably reflects my own ambivalence. Otherwise, people *will* jockey for position: it's not all that unforgivable. It's partly a legitimate (certainly natural) attempt to get proper attention for their work. You might feel they owe it to the work. To a degree. Totally cut-throat networking can look pretty creepy though. I like Sydney and Melbourne, and their art, I think. And I don't have any special brief for Adelaide. The need to ignore Adelaide reflects a political economy of prestige that is being protected. That is all that is going on. It's a reflex move.

ROBERT COOK: About the structure of your book. I have to say I loved the decision not to use pictures illustrating artworks you're discussing in the book. It gives the enterprise a weight and confidence as it makes one consider the prose as prose. It also reverses the usual dynamic of art writing somehow deferring to the artwork, only existing as a shadow of it in some ways. What was it like for you considering your own writing in this way? Related, I suppose, what are your thoughts on art prose as prose? Do you read much of it? Is it high or low on the genre scale?

KEN BOLTON: You either need a lot of pictures or none. I can read Peter Schjeldahl, say, on art I have little idea about and still enjoy it. So I didn't mind the no illustrations option. This was the publisher's decision, as was the focus on just Adelaide art.

ROBERT COOK: Okay, right, but *do* you read art writing much?

KEN BOLTON: Not a lot anymore. Peter Schjeldahl I like, especially his writing of the 1980s and 1990s. Also George Alexander. And I liked reading T.J. Clark, Greenberg and Fried, Lucy Lippard and early Rosalind Krauss. Paul Taylor was good. Most current writing seems too dutiful and industry-respectful to be much fun. But these opinions are excusing my real laziness, I think. I should read more current art writing than I do. Time is a factor.

ROBERT COOK: I wonder though, if there were really great stuff to read, you'd read it, right? It may be that once you get a sense of the lie of the discourse, it is not that important to read critics as such, but more interesting to read widely, to read history, literature, sociology and what-have-you that informs and opens out your approach to life that will filter in through the art writing and make it more human, more engaged in real matters. Is that how you see it—the sense of this in your work is what makes your writing interesting to me?

KEN BOLTON: I think I read whatever will make me more interested in things generally. Which sounds admirably open-minded, but I'm not all that adventurously omnivorous. I was reading some Donald Kuspit recently—so I do still read the stuff—a book I hadn't finished and have owned for a while (quite a while), and I liked it. I must have stopped (back in last century) because I'd got too used to his mind

and pre-occupations. I'd had enough for just that moment. But I suspect that with my art reading if someone is offering a perspective I already have under my belt via a terminology that I prefer—derived from 1960s/1970s thinking and Wolheim, Nelson Goodman and Donald Brook, and from attitudes formed in literary writing and my thinking about it—then I don't read on, out of plain, 'Yeah, yeah, I know this stuff', a kind of impatience.

ROBERT COOK: You have mentioned Donald Brook twice now. I always had him pinned, maybe wrongly, as a systematiser, which I don't think you are so much, though there are touches (maybe ironic touches?) of it. What has been his influence on your approach?

KEN BOLTON: He was an influential teacher when I was at the University of Sydney. His general outline of the range of definitions or conceptions of what-art-is was very good. At the same time I was excited by art history—or do I mean art? I knew nothing about it until I attended the lectures, beyond having looked at various books on art in the library the year before. Donald was not very interested in Art History and now seems to regard it as entirely misguided. I think his then position was almost conflatable with the (Greenbergian) one that holds that true art is the new analysis and distillation of art's means and that all else is non-art, being kitsch and/or craft—because it sought to repeat knowable, reachable goals and to resemble (to imitate) currently acceptable art. "Art-properly-so-called" (a phrase of Brook's that I love) would of course not resemble known art, in fact it would hardly be recognisable as art. So what most of us are calling art is not the real thing, in Donald's view. I'm sure this would not be Donald's self-description, of course. Anyway, it's a line that appeals to me, though I don't wish to rule out anywhere near so much from consideration. Donald Brook would object to being coupled with Greenberg—against whom he argued very successfully, attacking the American's dependence on "taste", and "eye". Early Greenberg, at least as stated in the essay on art and kitsch, was less open to attack. Greenberg came to want art as heroically decorative. Donald Brook wanted it to "do philosophy". This simplification probably does neither of them justice. I was imbibing Donald Brook at the same time as Greenberg, Fried, the Minimalists, Sol Le Witt and Lucy Lippard, and others. My thinking (to call it that) has its roots there. I'm not a systematic thinker. I'm not even, primarily, a thinker—except in the more general sense, in which artists and writers and critics qualify as that. Everyone does it, surely.

ROBERT COOK: Do you write art prose in a different way from poetry, with a different revision process, a different idea, or completion process? I assume of course the answer is yes, but still, articulating the difference would be interesting.

KEN BOLTON: Distraction is often the principle driving my literary writing. I want to follow ideas and associations and verbal textural patterns and contrasts wherever they might lead, partly because I'm not that interested in my performance as a thinker. But in art critical writing there is something to focus on, and I write more denotatively, therefore, a little less connotatively. I don't think I write especially good prose. I mean, I try. But I don't write often enough for one thing. And my poetry is no training for clarity of thought or logically developed argument. It has some virtues, but not, centrally, those. Thinking is all my poetry does, pretty much, but it is not concerned to be exactly linear or conclusive. Linearity is pretty unfashionable, I realise, but not with me. So it's not that.

ROBERT COOK: I'm still curious though. Your poetry seems both spontaneous and crafted. "Scored" might be a term you've used (I'm misapplying it). Do you do that, worry over format, pacing, the arch of a paragraph etc., when art writing? Or do you relax a little? To me, there's a weird pitch and turn to your art writing, and I'm interested in whether this is something you try to do, like the gears are shifting, or whether it is more like the thoughts have their own momentum and you allow them to simply be rather than overly formalising it all or troubling too much over pacing, spacing, timing, etc.

KEN BOLTON: "Scored" probably *is* the term, though I'd want to avoid licensing the misreading that then sees the poem's performance as the work, not the words on the page. It *is* largely about pacing, emphasis, weighting and to some degree, sometimes, a kind of embodiment—a making of the poem something gestural, to do with impulse, reticence, all the moods, really. I'm not conscious of charting those as a dominant, governing factor in my critical writing. But it is probably there. Some of the pieces offer themselves as more of a performance, an acting-out, than others.

ROBERT COOK: I wonder then, why not combine the two modes, in the ficto-critical mode? Or are you wanting not to sully your poetry—which I assume is the thing that defines you as 'an artist'—with that mongrel genre?

KEN BOLTON: From a literary point of view I'm all in favour of mongrelising. I think the shifting from register to register is what our minds do all the time. I think

handling the ‘high’ in a low register and the ‘low’ in a high register are even better than the constant shifting, that they often present insights where the appropriate register has already delivered all that it can. If one’s emotional verdict is that something is a dud, then one’s high-minded evaluations of it have to take that into account, and they should be able to. If a theorised judgement seems to be forming that something you sort of like is trivial, well, maybe it’s growing up time. But taking it further, as an artistic principle in the writing of art criticism. Well, almost no-one publishing the stuff wants you to do that, or will thank you for doing it. They don’t want you to deliver art: they want writing *about* art. If no-one wants to publish it, it is probably poetry, right? Or it might as well be. (Poets all nod here: we all know how to make this joke. People who read poetry, some of them, will like this sort of stuff. I think.)

ROBERT COOK: I think there is a place for a serious ficto-critical journal in this country, but I should get over that.

KEN BOLTON: People who like visual art want to read about it (sometimes), they don’t want to find the writer going off on their own jag. But maybe they would if it was marketed to them as just that. I hate the term “ficto-criticism”. They’re just plain old essays, aren’t they?

ROBERT COOK: Okay, I hate myself for the above question! I wrote it and then un-wrote it and then put it in to make it seem like I had an ‘agenda’. I have been going through a phase of wanting never to write performative essays ever again, and then thinking maybe I should but treat them more seriously, like they meant something.

KEN BOLTON: You should. You can worry later about how they’re categorised. “Ficto-criticism” suggests a kind of special pleading: “You’ve got to understand, this is ‘special writing’.”

ROBERT COOK: Ouch, yeah, I guess that’s what I want, me and Radiohead, “so fucking special...” The worrying later about how they’re categorised was kinda the point Gerald Murnane was making in some essay or other I will track down... It was a good point. Backtracking a little though, can you clarify what you mean when you say “If a theorised judgement seems to be forming that something you sort of like is trivial, well, maybe it’s growing up time?” Does this mean we are to somehow cede our desire (which Lacan said was a no-no!), to bend us into some kind of rational shape?

KEN BOLTON: Lacan? “That fruit-loop?” (Danielle Freakley, ‘The Legendary Short Session, and other crimes against the client’, *The Freakley Omnibus*, 2002.) It’s not a no-no, it’s an option. I’m not talking about (D)esire. I’m talking about acknowledging that some things are worth less time than others, a choice you make. If you’re big enough to live with Infantile-but-I-love-it, go ahead. I too, like Hitchcock and Mel Brooks movies—some of them. For example, how does Lacan feel about *High Anxiety*?

ROBERT COOK: I’ll call Slavoj Žižek, he’s sure to know. But surely, there is something to be gained by considering *why* one is drawn to the infantile? Ruling it out seems to perhaps fall into the trap of repression for the sake of what the theorised field constitutes to be as sound and reasonable. That strikes me as frightening though I find it very interesting then that you are indicating that your critical work puts you on the line as much as the art. Have any works or art situations maybe ever actually made this shift occur for you, where your outlook has evolved in a definite, discernable way from an encounter?

KEN BOLTON: I see your point. I’m not advocating life under the lash of the lacerating Super-ego. I like a lot of stuff I don’t think is really good. Sometimes that realisation can make you like it less. Sometimes your desire-driven tastes re-assert themselves and say, No!, this has to be accommodated, maybe within your working notions of Art. I really do mean it’s a choice. Writing about art—because it makes you try to arrive at evaluations that are sufficiently articulated—does lead you to affirm, re-affirm, reconsider, abandon or modify judgements and criteria.

ROBERT COOK: Okay, so what internal forces drove you to start writing about art? Related to this, do you also write about writing? If not, what is specific about visual art that intrigues in distinction to writing?

KEN BOLTON: I’m not sure how driven my writing on art is. Aesthetic issues seem to me inherently interesting. I like thinking about them. That they’re located, so to speak, in visual art means I can examine them with more disinterest than I could or can when it’s literary work, say. Within literature, I have much more of an axe to grind, a personal investment in the critical fortunes of certain styles and lineages. I’m part of it. But visual art is another world where the problems appear to me, a poet, in the abstract as it were, out of my own sphere. I do write literary criticism occasionally, but don’t do it as sharply as I do with visual art. I’m less

happy, less adroit, often feel more compromised or constrained. It tends not to pay well, either. That’s another factor. Not that art writing has made me rich.

ROBERT COOK: I’m still interested in your process. I was talking about your book recently with an artist who lives in Adelaide (he had read the parts about him) and he said one thing he appreciated about your writing is that you might see an exhibition and write about it six months later, the assumption being you’re mulling it over, taking it seriously, not pressed by deadlines perhaps, but by your internal considerations. Is that the case?

KEN BOLTON: Yes. Some exhibitions I forget about, but once you lock onto an artist, or flatter yourself that you have, you naturally begin to track them, to try to establish that you have got the shape of the work right, the velocity and trajectory. Often you haven’t. Sometimes your old notes can reveal how differently you saw somebody’s work in their early days.

ROBERT COOK: Related to this (and maybe it’s the same question) you often mention during a profile-type piece, a half dozen or so other exhibitions by that artist, stretching almost a decade back. And you seem to really remember these in detail. It’s silly but do you take notes, or just have an amazing memory? It would be really cool if you took notes when you weren’t necessarily going to write about the show, like an over-curious gumshoe.

KEN BOLTON: Actually, I do. Less often now, because I’m not called upon to review stuff so much lately. But sometimes I can’t resist. So there’ll be scraps of notes and some kind of argument, with the art, or with myself, written out, some in note form, some in full sentences and paragraphs. Along with jokes and all the rest. Why not? I always did make notes and draw diagrams of where things were in the show and rough cartoons of what works looked like. (No matter how bad the drawings, the fact of making them causes you to remember much more clearly.) A review didn’t always eventuate. I do it now if I like the show a lot or like thinking about it, arguing with it—as if explaining to an imaginary listener. But the articles probably give a stronger illusion of that concern than I am entitled to claim. The profile articles, for instance, often cannibalise old reviews of mine, aided with elaboration of the original notes that might have been made years before, arguments that couldn’t be included in a short review perhaps (but which got made in a draft). I keep it all on file, along with catalogues and invites.

ROBERT COOK: I like the picture that this gives me. I also like the idea of that kind of engagement with the work, the seriousness and respect that implies. Equally, it hits on what is, to me, distinctive in your writing, and it is something I guess I’ve been groping to adequately describe. It’s an internal conversation, argument, rumination, as much as (or rather, much more than) a public address. Does that make sense to you? I guess when you’ve said your poetry is “all thinking” there is an internality about that too. It differs therefore, with how I might write because I am always interested in voice, how I sound, as I create a Robert Cook character. Also, interestingly, the way your writing ‘happens’ very closely approximates the conversations I will have about an exhibition, a piece of work etc., with curators that I am (very) close to, that are very pragmatic and searching and open-ended and have a kind of tone that never makes it into print. Your work seems to get that.

KEN BOLTON: Glad you like it, of course. There are probably instances where I’ve written critical stuff ‘in persona’, in a performative sort of way. Establishing a tone is a way of trying to control how the stuff is read. It’s also a way of being entertaining for the reader. It can also be a way of unfairly limiting argument: the critic as a Kingsley Amis/Jeremy Clarkson figure. I doubt the Robert Cook persona resembles him?

ROBERT COOK: It’s so hard to tell. He rarely calls these days because he’s like so totally busy trying to make it as a male valley-girl beat poet on the American college indie pop scene. His ambitions aside, how do you see the two worlds of art and poetry in this country, comparatively that is. Art must seem more central, more acceptable, more mainstream? Is it, therefore, amusing to you to hear artists complain of their status here, especially from the poet’s perspective? It must be a million times easier to get an exhibition than to publish a book of poems? The audiences, though small for contemporary art, probably dwarf poetry’s.

KEN BOLTON: I don’t mind artists making those kinds of complaint. (I do hear them all the time, yes.) Artists have to put a lot of money into making and storing, framing and transporting, etc. Some of this is a fetishising that must bore even them. At other times it is exciting. Yes, it is easier, I think, to get to an exhibition than have a book published. And the money surrounding art means it pays for the attention it gets—it buys press, and tries to ensure ‘good’ press. And then it basks in that press. Novels get a similar treatment. But poetry, no. Visual art audiences make themselves visible—they turn up to these (highly subsidised) openings and drink and talk to each other, and go home. Poetry’s audience, big or small, is less

visible. It's probably voluntary though, uncoerced. The art crowd certainly look cooler. Not meeting the audience is great though. Not meeting the poet probably is, too.

ROBERT COOK: The idea of the constructed, if not exactly coerced audience is interesting. I'm interested how do the scenes work differently to your mind? I know nothing of the poetry scene, but from the outside it seems incredibly intense—maybe all I have in my head is the John Forbes vibe as presented in a doco I once saw. It is probably impossible to generalise across time and place but is one more constructive than the other?

KEN BOLTON: There's almost no pie to share apart from the gaining of critical attention. And the latter is hard to quantify. A large part of the readership is made up of other writers and happens online. I doubt that very much of that attention is close, or sustained: it's more a kind of monitoring. When someone begins to get some buzz around their work then it attracts greater focus and maybe hardcopy sale—books. But not enough for the major publishers and their publicity budgets to fund newspaper column-inches of attention. So no-one's head is likely to be turned much by that attention. It's evanescent. Uncorrupting, but unsatisfying. The intensity is around poets' commitment to particular kinds of intelligence and kinds of knowledge (or whatever—apprehension?) that particular literary orientations make available. There's always a poetry war going on, declared or not, about what kind (or kinds) of writing is good (or “are good”). Often one sort is anathema to another—for a practitioner, if not for a general reader. In that regard poetry resembles philosophy, I think—which is full of camps that cannot bear to recognise each other. Well, so it seems to me. Think of Picasso's distaste for Bonnard, or the Minimalists' and Conceptualists' hostility to Post-painterly Abstraction—which was returned, of course. They probably shared an identical kind of annoyance at Pop Art, which was their contemporary. I'm not saying there isn't the occasional generous spirit about.

ROBERT COOK: In a way you couldn't have constructed a more marginal position for yourself to take all this in, or to live both in and outside of. Is this how you see it, marginal?

KEN BOLTON: I've been able to generate just enough recognition to console myself, if I need to, that I really do exist. Only just enough, it's true. I'm not so bothered by it. *Currently* I'm not so bothered. There'll come a day when I'm more properly bitter, maybe. I hope not.

ROBERT COOK: I wonder, have you ever hankered after fame? Say the fame of an Ashberry? And considered moving to America and all, to personally invade the scene maybe? I ask because it's what every Australian (not just Perth or Adelaide or Darwin or Hobart-based) artist asks themselves—do I stay, do I go, or do I juggle a bit of staying with a bit of leaving? Related to this is, I guess, have you always stayed true to poetry? Have you started the great Australian novel that will make you the new Malouf?

KEN BOLTON: The New Malouf! I always wanted to be known to other writers and, maybe to people who read poetry. And breaking in on another scene and its queues and hierarchies and tribes was never a very likely move for me. I think poetry was the medium through which I handled 'being Australian', a job all Australians have, so that anyone's take on it is of some interest here. In principle, anyway. I was never likely to go to America and do that amongst them, or to the UK, or New Zealand. In-principle seems a governing phrase here. I mean, in *principle* one is writing for a local audience, though in fact almost no-one reads you. Going where there's not even an in-principle supposition of interest would be difficult. I was happier to stay here and *pretend* I wasn't alone. I've occasionally thought about going and 'breaking in' back in Sydney. But why? The second part of your question: I wrote an 'ordinary novel' in collaboration with John Jenkins, a poet I've written lots of poetry with. It is unpublished, though probably salvageable. (It was never going to make us “The new Malouf”). I love that phrase!) I hardly ever read standard novels: Bolano a bit recently, and I'm re-reading Harry Mathews and Gilbert Sorrentino. Have you? Are you, as we speak, working away on a novel, on one, or several?

ROBERT COOK: The novel thing? No. I don't think that would be my form at all. I have no powers of description. Now, I think most people are interested in how people sustain practices, and you do so, I gather, by working at Dark Horse. Has this been a nice substitute to working at a University as it keeps you intimately connected to ideas and writing and art?

KEN BOLTON: Dark Horse is the Australian Experimental Art Foundation's bookshop—but the job also involves my being the general meet-and-greet, information desk person for most visitors. I answer a lot of phones and all that. The pay is arts-industry level. That is, not good. The hours are short, so I have time to use that I wouldn't have doing a forty or fifty hour week.

ROBERT COOK: Is it a context that is necessary in some way for you to do what you do as a critic and as a poet?

KEN BOLTON: I don't read in the shop and very rarely try to write there. It's been a job that has turned out to be more secure than it might have. I do like being somehow (imaginatively, maybe?) in the art scene here: ideas regularly sluice through it and that is about my speed. I pick up ideas without being such a great or deep reader. Barthes and Foucault I've read a lot, and some Kristeva, but not much Derrida or Deleuze. Some Baudrillard. Adorno and Benjamin I've read a good deal—and Adorno is not an art-world favourite. I might not have read these things in another climate. Actually, I think this gives a false impression.

ROBERT COOK: Heavy thinker?

KEN BOLTON: Yeah. I know enough about these people to sell the books, as I do with many other authors. It's pretty shallow knowledge, if you could call it that. I do a lot of other reading—mostly history, cultural history and reviews of things, and literary texts—poetry, novels occasionally. Running a bookshop has made it possible to get these things more cheaply. Given an initial priming of aesthetics and art history, it is the art itself—accommodating it to one's ideas, making extensions to fit the new art in—that 'informs my thinking'. (I don't really feel entitled to that phrase.) *The art* has thinking of a kind and provokes it (Manet, Picasso, Matisse, Kirchner, Richter and Peyton, Pollock, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Eva Hesse, Smithson). Figurative art, if it's any good, makes a lot of evaluations, by design and by accident. Abstract art does as well, though differently. And writers I've grown up with, my own crowd, Anna Couani, Pam Brown, Laurie Duggan. In a dialogue or dialectic with them, and with phrases and phrasings from Frank O'Hara, Ted Berrigan, James Schuyler, and Adorno, Barthes and others—such as Greenberg and Donald Brook—that's what has informed my thinking. Not methodical, trained reading—because I read for pleasure. Some difficult works, sure, but only if I am enjoying the difficulty. It's the clash, the argument between them (between O'Hara and Lowell, Adorno and Heidegger) that produces the moves that you make your own arguments with or around. And this cloud of unknowing and partial knowing and history of opinions is with one as you try to do your own writing: poetry, in my case. And one thinks pretty hard about the art you're making, while you're in the process, a kind of deep mulling. The art-writing has been a way of responding to the world I seem to have embedded myself in. I would possibly not have been engaged with art so much, with particular careers and practices, if I hadn't been here. Who knows? The assumption that I might—or must necessarily—reflect the AEA critical line is something I have ignored. I don't and haven't. Under so many different directors my own take naturally has not always been theirs.

ROBERT COOK: Well, do you have the dream of writing fulltime or is that kind of hideous to think about?

KEN BOLTON: I think if I had a history of long periods in which to think and write in tandem, I might have produced different things. But I've probably adapted so much to writing out of distraction, snatched time, daydream, that I'm not sure I'll ever find out if that is the case. That said, once I have a larger project begun, I find it no trouble at all to let much of the rest of my life just happen to me—the routine of bookshop hours, etcetera—and have the periods of writing link up (over weeks, months even, almost as though there has been no interruption). It's the regularity of the job's routine that makes it possible to write. I might not get anything done if I had too much time.

ROBERT COOK: Cool. And hey! we're almost out of time ourselves. Let's end this like it's The 7PM project. What's coming up next for you Ken Bolton? Oh stuff it, what about the next thirty years? What's The Plan?

KEN: It's about time I formulated a plan. I'd like to get away, to Europe, Mexico, Vietnam, but maybe I'm dreaming. There are some new books in the offing: two collections of poetry—*A Whistled Bit Of Bop*, from Vagabond Press and *Sly Mongoose*, from Puncher & Wattmann. Sydney presses. And appearing any minute, a book called *The Circus*, an account of 'life in the circus', a circus in Northern Italy. It's full of poetic *longueurs*: the Strong Man ironing his tights, the ballerina wondering whether to leave or not, the ticket seller bored out of his brain, a kid in the ticket line wondering is he really wasting his money, the lion yawning, a death, a comeback, a happy moment. Illustrated by Michael Fitzjames. *The Circus* is published here in Adelaide, by Wakefield Press. So, I will seem, to some, to have been very busy.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ken Bolton, *Art Writing: Art in Adelaide in the 1990s and 2000s*, Contemporary Art Centre of SA, Adelaide. ISBN 978-1-875751-34-1

<sup>2</sup> A stupid gag, the idea behind which doesn't hold water. Just wanted to get at where Ken is coming from, which I do think is different from the academic's, the curator's, the director's