

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES ARCHIVE BALNAVES FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN SCULPTURE ARCHIVE PROJECT

Interview with Tom McCullough

24 March 2010

This is an edited transcript of an interview with Tom McCullough on 24 March 2010 at Mount Martha, Victoria, by Deborah Edwards, senior curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for the Balnaves Foundation Australian Sculpture Archive Project.

The project focuses on significant Australian sculptors and sculptural practice. It was developed with a grant from the Balnaves Foundation in 2010, which supported the recording and transcription of interviews with artists and other figures in Australian art.

About Tom McCullough

Tom McCullough has had an enormous impact on Australian sculpture. As director of the Mildura Art Centre, he curated the Mildura Prize for Sculpture in 1967 and the Mildura Sculpture Triennials in 1970, 1973, 1975 and 1978 as well as Sculpture 75 in Canberra. He was also curator of the first Australian Sculpture Triennial in Melbourne, in 1981, and artistic director of the second Biennale of Sydney, in 1976.

This is an edited transcript of a recorded interview. Some adjustments, including deletions, have been made to the original as part of the editing process; however, the accuracy of all statements has not been verified and errors of fact may not have been corrected. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent those of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Unedited audio files of this interview are in the Gallery's archive.

Interview on 24 March 2010

Deborah Edwards (DE): I was keen to sketch in your early life and early training. I am not even sure that I know when you came out [to Australia].

Tom McCullough (TM): Well, I was appointed to the Mildura High School after one year at Merbein High School, by choice I guess, five or six kilometres out of Mildura [in regional Victoria]. I applied for it because my wife and I loved the bush up there.

DE: And you trained here?

TM: I trained here. Melbourne Teachers College, 1960.

DE: And had you recently come out from Ireland?

TM: No, I came out in 1956 from Ireland, and I did a variety of things. I had a geology background there, drafting and so on, but I wanted to be an artist, and I found that my sweetheart was an art teacher so I became an art teacher, trained in Melbourne, and my first appointment was Merbein where we loved the bush. At Mildura High School – after Merbein High School on my first year out – you couldn't say that I was wholly sculpture-oriented, except that the Mildura Prize for Sculpture was already going. I missed 1961 [the 1961 Mildura Prize exhibition], I was still a student then, but I saw 1964, and helped Ernst van Hattum [curator, Mildura Arts Centre] set that display up, and repaired some of the sculptures. And I used to teach sculpture at the high school. We had lots of space and we used leftover material from the 1964 exhibition, that is pedestals. In those days everything had to have a pedestal and they used Mount Gambier stone blocks for these, so Ernst asked if the high school would like to buy the blocks and I said, 'By all means', so all of our children were cutting and sawing Mount Gambier stone, and it was great. I also taught ceramics, so I built a kiln. I got very much into three-dimensional art. The Mildura exhibition inspired me. I found lecturing to the children on Inge King's sculptures, Norma Redpath's sculptures, and meeting people like Ian Bow, who was very kind to me, excellent. The old-style bronze sculptor making his own moulds etc. I became really wrapped in that, and when Ernst departed I acted as interim director, and then I applied for the position at the behest of my mentor, [Mildura] councillor Reg Etherington, and I got the job.

DE: You resigned from the Department of Education?

TM: Yes, I did. I had served my obligatory three years, because everything was free in those days if you agreed to teach for three, maybe three and a half years, and I had to resign halfway through the year, which was pretty sad as some of my matric [matriculation] students were upset. I remember one mother came up and said, 'Won't you stay on until the end of the year?', but the beginning of my career as a curator was a lot more attractive. That was 1965, and the building of a brand new art gallery with a brand new art theatre ...

DE: Was that already underway?

TM: Yes, in fact that is what caused Ernst's departure. He had great political problems, and spat the dummy in a royal sense. He wanted to design the thing personally. He was a Dutchman and he knew what he was doing! He was a hell of a bloke, Ernst. I got to know him quite well, being one of the senior art teachers in the area. He didn't have many people to talk to, let's face it. And there was John Davis up there too. John was my predecessor at Mildura High School.

DE: He had already left when you got there?

TM: No, we overlapped, in that I was teaching at Merbein High School and he was at Mildura High School, and we discussed Dan [Danila] Vassilieff's paintings that were at Merbein High, that I subsequently borrowed for the gallery and they are still there. So John and I got to know each other really very well.

DE: And he would have been young then.

TM: Well, we were all young guys then, in our late twenties. He wanted to go to Melbourne and do his diploma, so getting back to Melbourne was very important to him, whereas I was very happy in Mildura and thought I would be there for the rest of my life. I loved the place, still do. I go back quite often. They gave me an award last year [actually in 2007] which was lovely.

DE: The council?

TM: Well, the art gallery, backed by the council. Outstanding contribution to the arts in Mildura. It was the Elliott Award. I got the second one. I am back in the fold again, as it were.

DE: Well, councils change, don't they? The position saw you fit out, and I am quoting, 'the first and largest regional multi-arts centre in Victoria'. Part of the ambitious plans which Ernst van Hattum and the council had had for Mildura were related to the Victorian government's regionalism at the time. So it synced in very well, didn't it?

TM: Yes, the Victorian Public Galleries Group, the VPGG, as it was known in those days.

DE: But money was also gained from different sources to complete the arts centre, wasn't it? Was there an active 'friends' group?

TM: Yes, and a gallery society, and they strongly backed my predecessor, but unfortunately they saw me as being a pro-council person, so it was a rocky road. I had to deconstruct, as it were, the old guard, and one of them became a shire councillor. She was so opposed to the building of the arts centre. It was highly charged, political.

DE: So a steep learning curve?

TM: Very much so. And I learnt from people like Reg Etherington, who lost his position on council through the arts centre being built. He was the mayor at the time and it was his mission, and poor old Reg was defeated twice, but his supporter was a younger man called Neil Noyce, who thankfully is still alive and who is a very close friend of mine. He absolutely supported me to the hilt. And it was through Neil Noyce, who was by profession a builder, that the arts centre was pushed through. It had to be done. It was a big fight. That was between 1964 and 67, and I came in on that wave, with all of its trajectories.

DE: So it was still in an historic house then, and you had to get the new show, of 1967, into the new space?

TM: The new space was my domain entirely and I had to transform the look of the show, which I thought I was doing in 1967, the first triennial that I ran, and I wondered why it felt a little flat. 1967 just didn't quite excite me enough. It was hard work.

DE: It was the last prize show, wasn't it?

TM: Yes. I'm not sure if it was that one, or the one before, but by 1970 I knew where I was going, and I threw out a lot of the old ideas, certainly the prize giving.

DE: In retrospect a lot of people say that the 1967 show is where you could clearly see the generational shifts, and with that a certain tension, the whole post-war humanist tradition, the Inge King's, Clifford Last's, rubbing shoulders with different kinds of works. I think it might have been Graeme Sturgeon who said that it was very interesting to look at the prize works and then look at your acquisitions for the gallery.

TM: Absolutely. I'm looking at photographs here of the one of the shift. Ron Upton, big sexual overtones there and not strictly representational; if you look at it in certain ways there are biological appendages. And Slotzyman and Slotzywoman from New Zealand, WR Allen [also known as Jim Allen]. They were the ones which should have been causing the controversies.

DE: Was 1967 the first time New Zealand sculptors had been involved?

TM: No. We had New Zealand works earlier, in 1964. Greer Twiss. I remember seeing his work in 1964.

DE: Was this due to Van Hattum? How did the New Zealand contingent find their way to Mildura? Was it that the landscape of sculpture prizes was so remarkably thin?

TM: Yes, the latter, and I think the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand was very keen to get New Zealand art over to the big mainland. But to give Ernst credit, he broke a lot of new ground, he did a lot. He was very energetic and I suppose there was a drought in opportunities to show sculpture. It was always linked to architecture, and Ernst tended to go that way, quite strongly – architectonic sculpture – and he always had architects on the judging panel. He was looking at it from that point of view and the incentive would be to get things like Lenton Parr's Chadstone Shopping Centre sculpture, and Stanley Hammond's [work], have those established sculptors, and Inge King, showing work that had been commissioned by architects.

DE: A very similar genesis then to the state sculpture societies setting themselves up, and groups like Centre Five, all of which had a very practical desire to catalyse commissions.

TM: Yes, they took that as the pattern.

DE: And did you say you were initially more a painter than a sculptor?

TM: I was never a great painter or sculptor or anything. I was really like a new breed of curator. I found my creative outlet in handling artworks and setting up exhibitions. I really loved the tensions within the space of the gallery; that sort of thing.

DE: I thought you were going to say the tensions of the politics involved ...

TM: Ha, well I am Irish, you know. I didn't mind a bit of a scuffle now and again, but you can take that a step further, because when I went overseas, in 1970, just after the fourth triennial, seeing the outdoor exhibitions around the world, the works that did not depend upon the white cube of the art gallery, they really got me excited, and installing works in the landscape became a great epiphany for me, wandering through Kröller-Müller [Museum in the Netherlands] and saying, 'This is it!' I am an outdoor person anyway but I had never thought of art in the landscape so radically until that Gulbenkian Foundation trip I took. Let's face it, 1970 in itself had a hint of all of this in it anyway, the 1970 Mildura Triennial. The Mildura Prize became the Mildura Triennial. There were works there where I had used the lawns and so on. I learnt in 1967 that the need for pedestals wasn't universal – what Ernst was always struggling to do, get enough concrete blocks, enough to build these great

podiums for everything – whereas by the end of 1967 I was looking at the sculptures that crawled across the floors and reared up the walls and by 1970 we embraced that fully. And also I had some experimental art there too – inflatables.

DE: In 1970?

TM: 1970, my word! 1970 for me was a real turning point.

DE: Was that because you had looked at the 1967 show, and the differences epitomised in the works that got prizes and those you purchased for the gallery, and realised that you were seeing an old and new generation, or at least parallel generations?

TM: Yes, and I was meeting artists who weren't interested in the prize idea, who wanted to create works with very cheap materials that didn't align themselves with architectonic, monumental statements. They were creating works exemplary in themselves of quite different ideas and quite different modes. They weren't sitting there posing. They were referring outwards and around and beginning to envelop the environment itself.

DE: Those kinds of sculptors are going to resist a prize exhibition. From the mid 1960s there are real changes in Australian art which I guess meant that the Mildura Prize had to be reshaped if it wanted to reflect contemporary sculptural concerns. There starts to be a relationship, doesn't there, between those out there, young, producing and uninterested in prizes and the prize exhibitions, which have to change? And yet, I am interested that the 1970s also seems to be full of prize shows, like the Comalco [Invitation Award for Sculpture in Aluminium], for example.

TM: There is nothing wrong with giving money to an artist to encourage them to make work, but the idea of awarding a prize with the idea that this would be a wonderful part of a building, this would be a wonderful monument ... And also the competitive aspect of it wasn't so attractive to a lot of artists who were changing their philosophies about competition per se. It was more an award for putting in a bright idea, a good concept, saying that we really admire your work, but the materialistic side of putting it up on another kind of pedestal, a metaphorical pedestal, was anathema to artists like Gippsland's Peter Cole. We had the whole hippy movement. Times were changing. We had all of that coming in from the late 1960s and the artists were reflecting the philosophies of the world very much in this way, and politics were coming into it too. You could see it more clearly later on, but the vibrations were there in 1967.

DE: Did you cop flak for the prize in 1967 being awarded to Bert Flugelman, but the acquisition being a luminal work by Mike Kitching? That Kitching sculpture would have been confronting for a lot of people at the time, I think, even metropolitan audiences.

TM: [Laughs] Well, we got both of them anyway. As a curator I wanted to strengthen my collection and I kept making this point to people: 'Look, we have gaps in the collection, and we need to reflect new things, like the Kitching. Look at those materials. We have to plug it into electricity, it lights up, it looks like it has a real function, it might take off'. And the Flugelman, which was straight out of [Sidney] Nolan's paintings, I guess, the equestrian, although interestingly made out of styrene foam and cast in iron, rather than being a bronze piece. The styrene foam shape, which was glued together, acted like lost wax. There was a clever piece of experimentation going on there, and I felt it was technically a challenging thing to do. Bert himself did other things, quite different. But that seems to straddle that period of 1967, going on to the 1970s.

DE: By the 1970s you start to ramp it up. It's going to be a national event, indeed an international event.

TM: Oh yes, I was always interested in the international.

DE: And you were starting to widen the boundaries of sculpture, and generally taking the councillors and gallery with you?

TM: Oh yes.

DE: So the golden years for Mildura became the 1970s. Noel Hutchison told me that the 1970 Mildura exhibition stays in his mind as the 'halcyon triennial' because he said there was such an excellent atmosphere, and that a lot of sculptors went down, perhaps five to six days beforehand and they stayed longer than they may have later on. He remembers a great deal of productive discussion.

TM: *Sculpturscape '73* would be the one that most people said that about.

DE: Yes, which makes it more interesting, I guess, that he remembered 1970 in this way.

TM: I certainly saw the 1970 exhibition as more of a festival and a celebration and we involved the theatre as well, and some of the artists put on theatrical performances, and we also had things like Tony Coleing's great *Wind construction* whizzing around, huge, 40 feet high. It was very exciting to have the official opening at a time when the theatre was trying to integrate itself with our arts centre, because that was a step ahead for us as well. In 1967 we had a new gallery, a new theatre, and that was very difficult, trying to work with brand new buildings, and the gallery flooded with our first downpour of rain and paintings got wet, so we were looking over our shoulders at what had been achieved in 1961 and 1964 and trying at least to emulate that. The theatre was a real pain in the neck for me. I was not a theatrical person. Sure I was in a little theatre as an amateur and I was very much tied up with social life in Mildura, the ballet guild, and [Harcourt] Algeranoff was a close friend – all the professionals stuck together, but we got that behind us in 1967. In 1970 we said, 'Look what we can do with this!' Tony Coleing came and hung springs from the big girders in the gallery, you had to walk through them – god, if they had fallen they would have killed someone – but it was lovely stuff and we were looking at what you could do with the envelope we had, and then the lawns became much more of a focus, and we realised that that was what made Mildura different from all the other places, and consequently by 1973 I took the plunge and said, 'Guess what? We are not going to use the gallery at all, but we are going to use the former rubbish tip!' A transformed rubbish tip became *Sculpturscape '73*.

DE: Who was the installation crew, or was it you? The person/s who had the practical chutzpah to deal with Tony Coleing's springs when they came in, for example. These days at the Art Gallery of New South Wales we take such things on with a crew of nine and a crane-driving forklift guy.

TM: I had about four people, I suppose, and I worked with the city council staff and borrowed people from the engineering department. My caretaker was an ex-council crane driver, Jack Cumming, and I appointed him because I knew he could handle cranes. We were a very small team. Ron Caldwell was an ex-policeman, who saved me from being king hit once by a mad sculptor, and we just worked together and we worked with the artists, which was great, and the artists worked with each other and helped each other. We were all in it. John Davis was hammering in label pegs when we were running late. Marr Grounds, as a trained architect, was casting Tony Coleing's bases for his sculptures. I was running around just trying to keep on top of all those things but very much hands-on too. One didn't have much back up beyond that. One secretarial assistant who was frantically on catalogue text. We had typewriters in those days! Photocopiers were the height of technology. It was very raw. And you didn't have quite the same legal requirements; well, you didn't have the same legal

requirements at all. When in 1973 we had really difficult proposals, like digging a hole into the ground, well over a person's height, say four metres, concerning the question of shoring that up and making that safe, the sculptor turned up with kids from his high school – that is dear Ross Grounds. And he talked to the town clerk, Bill Downie, who said, 'Why don't you get a water tank and put that in and that will hold it up while people go down and have a look into it; it won't collapse', because the site was an old rubbish dump, oozy and mucky, so the town clerk even got enthusiastically involved. And the engineer – who was always a little iffy about things – he kicked in, and I was able to liaise with the engineer and various other partners and we got behind the show and 1973 was wonderful for that co-operation. I couldn't have done it in another time that didn't have that wonderful community spirit. The Apex club came and built me a mile of fencing, voluntarily. That was a big job. We did that a couple of months before the show. And dear friends came out, guys with all backgrounds, the Apex club involved fruit growers, teachers, all of that, and they were there drilling holes and hammering in fence posts and putting up wire. And I got more flak from people who didn't like the fences going up around the place than I did from anyone else. The artists created their own little outrage by, instead of constructing things, digging holes. And that's when shire councillors started to read the newspapers, the outrage letters to the editor, and then they would come down [to the gallery] and say, 'This ain't art'.

DE: Do you have a sense of visitor numbers? I found it difficult to get a sense of numbers to these shows. One reference I did find, I think it might have been Graeme Sturgeon, said there was an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 people to the 1978 Mildura exhibition.

TM: I always made sure I put out annual reports. I don't write creatively or analytically but I do report and I always ensure I publish reports on each year that I was there, for the shire council. [Searching] Here they are. Mildura itself has lots of archives; these are just extra copies I brought with me, all documented, with attendances etc.

DE: So these are all down at the Mildura Art Gallery?

TM: That or La Trobe [University] Library [in Melbourne]. I gave all my papers to La Trobe Library.

DE: I got through around six boxes of your ten boxes at La Trobe yesterday and didn't see the annual reports, so they may still be down at Mildura.

TM: I couldn't bring them down here. We were living in Melbourne and I thought, 'I can't bring it all down'. The annual reports – there is one for every year I was there – from around 1965–66, and then the last one, 1978–79, was done after I had left, but in the same mode, by Gwen Stainton, who took over from me.

DE: Anecdotally, what is your recollection of attendances? Did they keep developing until the late 70s?

TM: I think 1973 was a great leap and a lot of people were outraged by it and it became quite a cause and controversy, and by the next one, 1975 – I brought it forward to coincide with Arts Victoria, we got extra grants that way – that was really a ripper because we moved down into the township then. I took on the Ozone Theatre, because we had to get other indoor venues. 1973 didn't quite work for some artists because it was out-of-doors, and I realised that was a mistake, but it launched the outdoor venues in sculpture much more successfully, but then it was sensible in 1975 to put works back in the gallery as well as *Sculpturscape* and then go down into the city and use an old theatre there, the Ozone, and rent shops as well for things like Kevin Mortensen's *Delicatessen*. Kevin Mortensen wanted that. It was great fun negotiating *Delicatessen* from Bill Kelly.

DE: I remember Ken Scarlett's anecdote about going in and engaging with the actor that Mortensen put in there [to play Kelly], and that it was marvelous. What strikes me about the Mildura project is that you seemed to have had the very firm backing of a whole range of people who weren't necessarily in harmony with each other. So you have everybody from [Elwyn] Jack Lynn to his arch-enemy Donald Brook on deck and supporting Mildura, which I think is quite interesting. How did that come about?

TM: I always engaged those people right from the beginning and asked them for help straight out.

DE: You had a masterplan, if you like, of how you wanted to proceed?

TM: I needed advice and mentors and I always did a lot of travelling between the triennials. I visited the Jack Lynns and the Donald Brooks, Daniel Thomas, people I really admired. I had the newspaper clipping service sent into Mildura and I would read their crits and I would visit Sydney as often as I could, and go to Watters Gallery and talk to Frank [Watters], and to Geoffrey [Legge], do the rounds, even Rudy Komon, anybody who appeared in my newspaper clippings I would go along to talk to. And also, as we got the *Sculpturscape '73* grant from the Visual Arts Board [of the Australia Council] and it was a brand new organisation, they came up and you had Patrick McCaughey and John Baily and Jack Lynn and so on, and they took us on as being one of their pet projects.

DE: Didn't they have a VAB annual meeting down at Mildura, which they coincided with the exhibition?

TM: They sure did, and we took them down to our weekend block and we had a big barbeque by the billabong and plenty of good red wine, and Ron Robertson-Swann was on the board then to, and he was extremely helpful with liaison with Sydney sculptors, while we were friends, but I think Ron eventually spat the dummy. His idea of sculpture sure didn't fit in with what I thought could be sculpture. I had catholic tastes, and I really admired what Ron did as a high aesthetic achievement. I liked to see his work in the landscape, but he wanted to surround himself with sculptors who were construction-style people and he made sure they were there – he was very well-organised – and he made sure I could buy some of their work at the right price. There was a lot of wheeling and dealing and trading going on, which was all to the good as my gallery was being spotlighted. It needed the spotlight. The tyranny of distance was helping us for a while, because, poor old Mildura, it was closer to Adelaide than Melbourne but it wasn't out of reach to Sydney or Canberra and the people in those various cities felt they were on neutral territory when they came to Mildura and I certainly encouraged them to think that way. Guys like Michael Nicholson – I would visit him in Paddington – miles away from the Ron Robertson-Swanns, but I still went to talk to them and I tried to talk everybody into giving me suggestions and recommendations for who I should invite to the exhibitions. And for a while there, there was a lot of mud thrown at the final exhibitions I was doing. There were claims that they weren't selective enough, indeed that they weren't selective at all. You will read crits that say it has all just been thrown together, it's haywire, it was confusing. Far from it! There were people whose work I considered was so incompetent that when they presented an idea, I would just say, 'Sorry'. Yet I would accept well-recommended students, almost work sight unseen. If John Davis said, 'This guy has a great future ahead of him and he has great ideas'. If he presented any sort of proposal that I could recognise as being in harmony with the way in which sculpture and the ideas of sculpture were increasing and enlarging, I would help them as much as I could. And some didn't come up to scratch, but that happens in every exhibition. I didn't tightly preview every piece in the studio before it came to Mildura. I couldn't do it.

DE: Yes, of course not. And also, often, one looks at artist's work and decides to show them, and then they want to make a special work for the exhibition, and you can sometimes be

stunned by that, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. Sometimes the show they are going into catalyses a change or re-shaping of their art.

TM: Well, it's a risk you take.

DE: Yes, it's an act of faith. I suspect that you were involved in a project which was contentious ground in the late 1960s and 70s. I mean, it is a microcosm of what is going on globally, as major shifts and transitions are made in sculpture, so it stands to reason.

I think even today Ron Robertson-Swann is as definite as he was then in asserting sculpture as an object-based art and is just as able to look at a work and say, 'That is not sculpture'. That is four decades of holding to a particular line.

TM: If he had been a curator he would have been in big trouble.

DE: Yes, though many contemporary art curators are accused these days of moving in narrow trenches.

TM: Yes, well I have lost touch with all of that. In my day, it was the wild west and my god ... Quite a different time.

DE: I guess what started to happen was that many of the older artists began to think that the Mildura context was not necessarily where their work was going – although Inge King stayed, I know – and also that the function was shifting, that if the earlier shows had as a base the idea of engendering architectural commissions for sculptures, that shifted.

TM: Yes, right out the door.

DE: So you wouldn't have people coming down to the 1973 show, for example, to look for works to put in their foyer at Comalco House.

TM: No, and I don't know that we ever did very much. That was a bit of a forlorn hope really.

DE: I suspect the same with the NSW Society of Sculptors, who began to have open-air exhibitions from 1951 with the direct idea of encouraging industry and architects to commissions.

TM: Yes, the Comalco Prize, and to my mind, we didn't need that anyway. We had government support to run exciting experimental works. I didn't really mind people like Cliff Last and Lenton Parr saying no. Look there was never any real animosity there; they just quietly withdrew. They didn't need to be shown at Mildura anyway. I can't understand Inge [King], except that she is such a gracious woman. She helped my daughter when she was doing her degree in sculpture at RMIT because they grew up as little tots staggering amongst the sculpture. She was different from the men.

DE: She has done extremely well within that milieu, hasn't she? What they call the 'metal boys'. I want to ask you, as I am going to interview him soon, about Donald Brook. What a fascinating man he turns out to be.

TM: I met him very early on.

DE: Did you? That was what I wanted to ask about. Because he was doing a PhD on sculpture in Canberra, over perhaps 1964, 65, 66.

TM: I went and stayed with them in Canberra, I think. Yes, he was a young man, starting a young family, but to me he was the person who could write a criticism like no one I had ever known. His words came through so lucidly and clearly, and argued so well, and in the world of living in a country town, you need these pillars.

DE: He was also a polarising figure.

TM: I never found him prickly or difficult in any way.

DE: I don't know personally, but philosophically he seems, like strong people perhaps, one who polarised others. For example, I know a little about the philosophical differences which did play themselves out in personal animosity, between him and Jack Lynn at the Tin Sheds. I think Bernard Smith and Donald Brook also had their differences.

TM: He gave a lecture, 'The flight from the object'.

DE: Yes. Did you go to that?

TM: Yes, I was there. Now when was that?

DE: I have that somewhere [1969]. It was a real polemic, wasn't it?

TM: I know it was a Power Foundation lecture.

DE: So when did you meet Brook?

TM: I met him in Canberra. I saw his sculpture. I wanted him in the show.

DE: So you went to him first as a practising sculptor?

TM: Yes. I had one of his works in the show, in one of the triennials. But his writings were a great source of inspiration for me and made sense of a lot of the things that artists were doing but maybe not articulating. He interpreted works for me that I may have had some difficulty with. There were times when I just winged it along. I looked at works, I found them moving, but for the life of me I couldn't work out what the hell it was about. But I knew it was about something, that it was A-R-T and I needed to interpret it, I needed an interlocutor of some kind, and people like Daniel Thomas and Donald Brook, as well as the artists themselves, helped fill in a lot of blanks for me, and gave me an opportunity to look at works I had never seen before and who had made them and see where they sat.

DE: Yes, the contextualising. When you are in the middle of something new, contextualising is a tricky business, and I suppose those with an historical take are better equipped. As we know, Donald Brook also became known as the talisman of an Australian avant-garde.

TM: Certainly with the Adelaide situation, when he brought a whole group of his students, the Laszlo Toth Foundation, a group of young anarchists who threatened to destroy things in Mildura – well, I was terrified. They looked like young goths, and they were running around, putting stickers on things, 'This is not Art', and putting posters up, and had very nihilistic approaches to art. But I had seen that in New York in 1970. I had seen an anarchistic association of artists, something like that, come in to the Metropolitan Museum – we were all having a nice curators dinner – and taking handfuls of confetti out of their pockets and throwing them at masterpieces, and everybody, guards and everybody, thought they were smashing things. But my feeling was, when they were in Mildura, that they were simply questioning what art was all about. And that was what Donald Brook was excellent at, and it was great. By the end of the period, I felt I had come to terms with what they were on about,

that these were young people who were thinking deeply about art galleries, artists, and of course they rubbished curators. They were trying to analyse what our role in life was, or re-manipulating art to come to terms with what it actually is, and it was very exciting for me.

DE: Although you were also the meat in the sandwich, having to explain it all to Mildura.

TM: Trying to.

DE: There are a lot of cliches about country towns and people's attitudes, some of which are true, some not. So I think you could see it simply as 'a slice of the public' and you would have had to explain it to any public, whether in the country or in Sydney.

TM: You have a range of total extremes: people who would accept it no matter what it was – as long as it was in an art gallery, it was art – right through to people who felt that if it was in an art gallery it should depict things that you can recognise. But the feedback for me was that exposure to experimental art over the 1970s was enough to give many young Mildura people and some of the older ones too a great insight into how exciting the art world is and was and could be, and the feedback I get now is that those were great exhibitions. They didn't say it at the time and didn't fill in petitions that 'we want our art back' but there is a sense of genuine regret that those exhibitions never became as exciting again. And they didn't understand what we were doing at the time, but it was exciting, it was good. In retrospect they felt it was very worthwhile and they were certainly happier being in a country town with a big exhibition like this than being in a country town that didn't have those challenges, intellectual and aesthetic.

DE: You also provided a stage for artists, not only a lot of emerging ones who went on to become extremely important figures over the 70s and 80s, but many others. And also they were perhaps outside their comfort zones in Mildura, in terms of viewer relationships, and that strikes me as interesting.

TM: Peter Tyndall was a great example of that. I feel so privileged to have met these people and worked with them. I was just in awe of how brilliant their imaginations were. Peter came and lived in Mildura, set up *The shooting gallery*, and I got to know him much better at that time. I had seen him in earlier exhibitions but he had such a great philosophy about what art could be and the role of the art and the artist, and of the viewer/the spectator, and it all came together in Mildura. And then of course he became involved in the politics because he could see that we were headed for a great confrontation with my employer, and he went along to council meetings and wrote wonderful letters.

DE: Yes, he wrote the 16-page refutation of all of their claims in 1978, didn't he?

TM: Which I reproduced in the follow-up publication, which the council set fire to, but then it has been republished.

DE: The symbolism. A book burning! It is just remarkable.

TM: Oh yes.

DE: I gather that before it was republished there were about three or four in existence.

TM: I had about a dozen. I got some off the printer and hung on to them, and I sent one to each of the state libraries.

DE: Would you subscribe to the view then that, beyond the smaller issues, the local issues which were starting to play a very strong part in the project, given the basic view that

Australia came to a form of cultural maturity in the late 60s, that there was a lot of optimism, that financially things were good, but that by the 80s that was starting to erode away, and could that erosion have become part of what happened to the triennials?

TM: I think that the art world, through dealers and curators, decided that there were more important things than what had been done in the past. I felt very much left behind. To my mind what happened was that we had many, many more sculptors doing much better works. When was this? [Looking at catalogue] This was 1981. The Preston show [Australian Sculpture Triennial 1981 at Preston Institute of Technology and La Trobe University, Melbourne, curated by McCullough]. It was a massive show. The fact that it was in Melbourne went against it in some respects, in contrast to Mildura, but on the other hand, if you look at the sheer numbers and the sophistication of the ideas ... And it is better documented than a lot of the ones I did before.

DE: It is a remarkable publication, huge for the time as an exhibition catalogue

TM: Well, I did have assistance with it too. Being at a university was a better atmosphere than working in a country town and having to put on a show every three weeks. I had nothing to do except this. I was employed as a lecturer so I had a better opportunity. But the artists who contributed to this exhibition were amazing. And I would have thought that this would have set up – certainly in the sculpture world and the experimental art field generally – would have set it up for at least another decade as exciting as the 1970s. I mean, I went over and saw what Joseph Beuys was doing and talked to him about where art was going! All that optimism. And I heard from all of those Europeans what they are doing, and what I did with the Biennale [of Sydney] in 1976. There was no turning back, and yet after this, what happened was that the show went to the National Gallery of Victoria [NGV]. It tightened up. That didn't happen because of the artists. No way.

DE: Was that with Geoffrey Edwards as the curator?

TM: It was Graeme Sturgeon, and Graeme was strongly into selectivity and standards, and I went and saw that show and it was a good show, beautiful and elegant and there were exciting parts to it, and there were more new young sculptors that I hadn't seen, and I thought, 'Well, that's OK', although it seemed a little tame in some respects. And the biennales in Sydney were doing the same thing, under Nick Waterlow. They suddenly went into paintings, and then there was Aboriginal art. That was a manipulated situation. Mildura was about sculpture or three-dimensional art in all forms, and it was dedicated, and it was meant to reflect what was happening, *reflect*. I thought it was going to transfer itself to the Preston–La Trobe University area, but I am afraid that we got very bad press.

DE: Was there? Apologies, just an aside, a practical question before we get too further along. Did you see the Christo *Wrapped Coast* project in Sydney in 1969?

TM: Yes, I did. I flew up to see it especially.

DE: I know John Davis responded to the call which went around to the various art colleges, and was one of the people helping, I think.

TM: I don't know. I went as the director of the Mildura Arts Centre. I had free flights through sponsorship with Ansett. It was fantastic.

DE: Those days are gone.

TM: Times do change [laughter] but one of the ways I could keep in touch with artists was that I could go to the manager and say, 'Look, I would love to see this show', and he would

say, 'It's alright, Tom', and I would fly off and have a great couple of days, and I flew up to see Christo – mind you, I might have been going up to also do something else – and I made the taxi trip out, and I always had my 35mm [camera] in those days, taking slides. I gave little slide talks when I went back, to the gallery society, and I said, 'You've read in the papers about Christo. Look at these!' I had big coloured photographs up on the wall and that's why I got Christo to come to Mildura, and had a piece shown in the next Mildura exhibition. That was 1970. Again that was the year when I was far more confident about what I could present as sculpture in Mildura, and I was much more interested in the way in which these artists were opening people's eyes to three-dimensional worlds, and to walk over the [Christo] sculpture was brilliant. I nearly got snow blind.

DE: Did you have the sense that it had a huge impact across the board? The object-based guys were up in arms. There has been a lot of mythologising about the Christo coast, and yet on the other hand, it does appear to have been momentous.

TM: Well, I wasn't living in Melbourne, Sydney or Adelaide. I lived in Mildura and dealt with a small circle. I read the critics but that isn't really what the artists are saying to each other.

DE: I had the sense in looking briefly at your [archive] boxes yesterday that there is a lot of correspondence with artists, but perhaps that will prove to be largely about the Mildura shows. I had the impression though that you were in regular correspondence with a lot of sculptors.

TM: About their art rather than discussions about what was going on. That would happen when I would go and stay at Marr Grounds' place while I was doing things in Sydney, and Tony Coleing's, when they both had different floors of the old warehouse there [in Paddington]. You would get a Saturday night wrap, but they belonged to their own world too. They poo-pooed the Ron Robertson-Swann lot as much as the Ron Robertson-Swann lot would poo-poo them. You would sit in the middle and think, 'Yes, they are all right. They are correct in their sphere and their understanding', and when you travel internationally you get a better feeling for ... You have to tolerate other people's art, you can't tell what is going to happen in ten years, what that work is going to look like in ten years, and if there is a little branch deviated out and it looks weak and not going anywhere, that may [nonetheless] be the great thing that is going to change the course of art history. And I think at Mildura we were very privileged to see some of those little branches and rivulets going out. I remember one piece in 1967 which really puzzled me, and it was a guy I had gone through teachers college with. He taught transcendental meditation and he wanted to put a piece in the Mildura sculpture exhibition, and I guess he would have been an outsider, but he had poles with plaster of Paris built on them and they had to lean against a wall, and they were based, I think, on New Guinea ancestral poles, and I really was attracted to them, and I liked the idea of that being sculpture, but when you looked around at all of the pieces sitting on pedestals in 1970, you wondered, 'Is that really art or is that just Ian Alford playing with stuff?' I can't remember what happened to him artistically, I think he just continued deeper into his transcendental meditation, which he taught me, thank heavens. That piece would have looked much more comfortable in 1975, so he was years ahead in his approach to sculpture, although he didn't found a school or anything like that. He was just an art teacher like me, had done a secondary art and craft course, and then ended up teaching meditation, but he was making sculpture with a most unusual concept. So in Mildura we had the privilege of seeing little vignettes like this appearing.

DE: You were also a litmus test, in a sense, for debates of the period. For example, did the fairly strong debate between what was design and what was sculpture start to play itself out in the 1970s Mildura shows? You had the object-based people, the post-object people, and you also had those saying, 'That's not a piece of sculpture, that's a piece of design'.

TM: Yes. 'Origami in steel!' We heard that, with David Wilson.

DE: I think there was probably a lot of heat in those debates.

TM: Oh yes, and at those campfires, in Apex Park. We always had them at Easter, with a big full moon, and I'm sure it bred a lot of madness, not just in the artists [laughter].

DE: Could people camp?

TM: Yes. Apex Park was a caravan park, and just a walk up to the arts centre.

DE: If I had to ask you who really took your fancy in the 1970s, who was utterly impressive for you at Mildura, one or more artists, could you answer? For example, many people have cited John Davis in this context, although in Sydney he has had high reputation, but not as high as in Melbourne.

TM: Well, I was very close to John and knew his wife Shirley and I saw his work develop from rather plodding stuff – multiples – and I couldn't quite get the grip of that, but when he started the twigs and the binding ... And I did buy the *Unrolled piece* for the collection at an early stage, yes. But he was a very personal, private artist in some ways and he was part of a school of – what shall we call it? – the esoteric philosophy, 'I know what it's all about and you don't', and that's one aspect of the work that I never really enjoyed, a secretiveness for its own sake, so I had reservations.

DE: He strikes me as a very interesting example of an artist who became alive to those changes of the 1960s and 70s, that having gone through an earlier training that did not lead to that new point, he shifted, but he ended with a strange form of hybrid conceptual plus the aesthetically-loaded-object-type sculpture.

TM: And the poor materials he was using. That wonderful concept Aboriginal people had of making art from very simple and ephemeral materials. I certainly admired that. And I admired the way in which he went back to the Murray River – I think he was a Swan Hill boy originally. The Mildura–Swan Hill aspect has always stayed with me. I am using those as fairly subjective reasons for liking his art, rather than line up all the great artists in Australia and pick. I have the same respect for Marr Grounds' work but I prefer Marr's intellectualisation of it, and where he works through and across and back towards. I really enjoy his works and his approach to art and his whole philosophy and his method of communicating his ideas – so straightforward. Back to Melbourne again, I can't go beyond Kevin Mortensen as someone who was just so original, but again you have that esotericism. He was magic but, in a way, self-conscious.

DE: As one starts to look back at this field, so many of these fabulous artists appear to have had their heydays in these years. It feels like a greater percentage fell by the wayside than at other times, but I do need to investigate this. I wonder if it has to do with the seismic shifts which were going on in sculpture in this era, and the fact that, by the advent of the 80s, one would be hard-pressed to define sculpture.

TM: Yes.

DE: History pigeonholes people in a terrible way, so artists are meant to make their mark in a particular decade, and then we forget that they keep working. But I do have a sense that there were a lot of casualties.

TM: Some of the women who were in Mildura disappeared. They were doing really exciting things. And the fact that we had to wake up in Mildura to feminism. Although I had been to

America and seen it in a political sense, I hadn't connected it to the art world until the likes of some of these women – Marlee Creaser, Noelene Lucas and others – began to talk about their art and their place in the art world. I thought, 'Yes! Why don't we have more than a small percentage of women?' My answer always was that I just didn't see them, didn't contact them, hadn't the opportunity. We never tried consciously to get a balance, that wasn't something that you felt you were required to do.

DE: I know [Mildura triennial historian] Anne Sanders' strong view is that what happened in Mildura had a strong relationship to the massive changes that were happening at the time in art education. It's not until you have active women in the system that support women artists coming through that they are visible enough to include in shows.

TM: Looking over your shoulder, you can get great perspectives on it. Having been out of the art world for a long time now, I get these shocks when I go to look at an exhibition and see beautiful works that fit beautifully into the 70s but are the logical development there from, and done much more professionally.

DE: The Sculpture Park in 1975 sounded like a fabulous idea. I guess at one level you might have wanted to do this in Mildura, having seen the sculpture parks of the world.

TM: There is McClelland Gallery [in Melbourne], and every big gallery has an open space around it, areas for outdoor installations, but I put my proposal up in 1971, not 1975. I came back from the Gulbenkian and that was part of my report. That I had looked around the world, been to Hakone in Japan and various places, and that we could do it in Mildura.

DE: Was it going to be national or about international art?

TM: I don't know that I looked at it beyond being there. It would have been international, I guess. But working with what we had, it was going to be based on the triennials which had the New Zealand element in them. It wasn't until I went to England and got some of the English artists to send stuff out – Peter Hoogenboom and people like that, that were easily packed up and airmailed out – that we had truly international pieces. That was 1973. But I gave them the formula. I said, 'Here's the area adjacent to the art gallery. We already have lawns which have been accepted by sculptors around Australia. Let's annex this area and make it into a permanent sculpture park.'

DE: The work you were already getting was ambitious enough in scale and conception to feed into this idea.

TM: Yes. The Tony Coleing piece was an excellent example of that, in 1970: *Wind construction*. It should have been Mildura's. Eric Westbrook launched an appeal straight away on our behalf to raise funds for it. We really thought that that was staying in Mildura, that the federal or state government – actually it wasn't federal in those days; this was before we had any federal backing – but that the state government would back it, and that the Mildura people ... It was popular enough. It was light-hearted and had all of the attributes that Sunraysia [the region that has Mildura as its centre] could identify with.

DE: What happened?

TM: We didn't have enough money and Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, who claimed to own it because he allowed Tony Coleing to use his materials and his area, he claimed it back. Tony wasn't too happy about that.

[Break in interview, in which there is reference to McCullough's proposed exhibition of French sculpture at Mildura in 1973, which led to a protest by local artists]

TM: I had gone to France. I am a Francophile anyway, and I had worked hard and got this show organised and it was a great feather in my cap to have gotten this show, to preview it in Mildura and then send it on a tour of state galleries, and I just felt so saddened that the art could be used in a way that would have hurt the artists and not really the [French] government very much.

DE: I guess that is where it becomes opaque. Noel [Hutchison]'s view that artists could not be seen to be supporting the French at all [due to French nuclear testing in the Pacific] ... There was the Rainbow Warrior incident [the bombing of a Greenpeace protest ship in New Zealand in 1985 by French intelligence services].

TM: But it was an interesting thing. I defused it, I think, with as good a grace as I could. I accepted the artists' view and went to Canberra and said to the Cultural Affairs person, Albert Salon, 'I'm sorry, but I have to work with our artists. I am embarrassed, and would it matter if we rescheduled the show to go elsewhere?'. And he said, 'We couldn't care less'. He said, 'It's your show'. I thought, 'Oh god, I have gone through all of this!' [laughs] Such a put down. Mildura, Brisbane, what does it matter? Raoul Mellish in Brisbane [director of the Queensland Art Gallery], himself a Francophile, was glad to have it open up there. It was a bit of a giggle in a way, and we had it later on, along the way. I thought the Australian artists would love to see it. That was the idea, a big international chunk, and it's us going international. I had had a few British and a few Americans here and there but had not had an opportunity to have a curated show like this, of modern sculpture, to coincide with our triennial. But some of the artists found it annoying that it was being shown in the gallery proper and displacing their works, but to me it was just moving things around. The spaces that were available around Mildura by that stage were many and varied, and some people liked to work in bakeries and shops and theatres that we had rented, and rubbish tips.

DE: What about the 1976 Sydney Biennale [*Recent international forms in art* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), 13 November – 19 December, of which McCullough was artistic director]? Under the terms you set for yourself for the show, was it a major success? Did you get the feedback you wanted from Australian sculptors and from the public? Did you achieve what you set out to do?

TM: I must say that when I went up to Sydney for the interview with the [AGNSW] trustees as to what sort of biennale I would have, I was scrabbling in the dark. I really didn't know where to start but I put together a proposal to them that seemed ambitious – some sculptures outside in the park as well as through the Gallery – and I remember talking to these rather impressive men sitting back wondering how 'their gallery' would look with a show like this, but it was supported by Franco [Belgiorno-Nettis].

DE: Who was not a trustee at the time, was he?

TM: I think he was [Belgiorno-Nettis was an AGNSW trustee from 1974 to 1980]. But they said OK, and I must admit that by the time November came up I was greatly relieved that the show looked the way it did, that it had a good coherent look to it, and the breadth of works was so impressive and so universal, that we had captured so many wonderful 'scalps' as it were, and that we had gotten them into Sydney in time, because the Italians left it; it was white-knuckle time.

DE: Regarding the international sculptors that you had, was there positive feedback from local sculptors? I guess, by 1976, sculptors were travelling overseas more. Nonetheless, it may have represented real catharsis for some practitioners, along with the public.

TM: Yes, Fujiko Nakaya came out and installed her work [a fog piece in the adjacent Domain parkland]. I went to Japan and first talked to her about her piece. It was an incredibly difficult piece to get together technically, high-pressure valves and high-pressure water, and working with the Sydney Council, and the curators at the AGNSW interceding, working with the artist, but it came together and the artists loved it, with the exception of Ron Robertson-Swann.

DE: Well, didn't he refuse to show in the 1978 Triennial on the basis of what you had put into the 1976 Biennale?

TM: Something like that. But he was pretty helpful when I first went up to talk to him in 1976, but he wanted to make sure that sculptors of note that he admired were involved.

DE: [Clement] Greenberg in 1968. He came out to Australia. Did you attend his lecture ['Avant-garde attitudes: new art in the sixties', the first Power Institute lecture at the University of Sydney]?

TM: I was underwhelmed by it. Give me Donald Brook any day.

DE: The Australian sculptors you had in the 1976 Biennale. Do you keep in touch with them? You had Marlee Creaser, Marr Grounds, Kevin Mortensen, John Davis, Noel Hutchison, Les Kossatz, Stelarc, [Clive] Murray-White, Michael Nicholson, John Penny, Terry Reid, Ron Robertson-Swann, Noel Sheridan, Ken Unsworth and David Wilson. Are you in touch with any?

TM: Terry Reid, of course, and Marr Grounds, once a year. Noel [Hutchison] sometimes. He was at the Victorian College of the Arts.

DE: OK. Regarding 1978, the most conflict-full Mildura Triennial. You have talked a little about this, but I was wondering how much the conflict was about local hostility, how much was about the finances because 1978 was the most expansive of the triennials, how much about the fact that the biennale model itself had worked? It doesn't sound like the finances were a core concern.

TM: I always brought in my exhibitions on budget. I have always been able to balance my books for all my exhibitions, until I went into the sports world. I have always been able to keep to a little under budget. I think realistic budgeting is important. I certainly didn't use a lot of money compared to what the budgets are today. Raising the funds was hard work, as it always is, but accounting for the exhibition afterwards was great. I had extra amounts such as for the follow-up publications. The Visual Arts Board gave me [in 1973] \$10,000. I used that for a follow-up publication because I had already budgeted for the tiny little exhibition catalogues. The follow-up publication was a hell of a lot of work to get done but I had assistance there, which was great.

DE: The AGNSW has just put out several contemporary art publications which go back to that model, the same thick cardboard covers etc – our postmodern quoting.

TM: Did you notice the Biennale one? Where I used brown paper as arte povera [laughs]. It didn't work because the brown paper looked awful, very poor.

DE: You were happy with the 1981 Triennial? 1978 was the major fallout with Mildura Council. Did you then go straight to Pit Space [at Preston Institute of Technology, Melbourne], as the gallery curator and director?

TM: Yes, but I was employed as a lecturer as well, although I didn't have much lecturing to do. That was my understanding. And unfortunately at the end of the fourth year, my contract

ran out and wasn't renewed because I really wasn't carrying a lecturing load, and Betty Churcher had become the head of the art and design school – she wasn't on the staff when I was appointed – and her view was very much in art scholarship. It was sad.

DE: Had you enjoyed it?

TM: I enjoyed working in the art school. There were great artists there.

DE: Employed as a lecturer in art history or contemporary?

TM: Well, to run Pit Space, and I was using students to set up the exhibitions and I was teaching them the practicalities of curating, not a formal course, but Brian Seidel, who invited me to do the job, had a very imaginative view of what the art and design school could be, that it was silly to just be turning out painters or designers who would be going into the art world and not having a hands-on idea of what makes a gallery tick, so I ran these little exhibitions, some not so little – the triennial was huge – but before that I had performance festivals. I had Bonita Ely come down.

DE: 1979 to 1983. Was there a performance emphasis?

TM: Oh, very much so. Peter Kennedy was on the staff with me and we were both on that four-year contract and we both got the chop. It was during that time when it was getting hard to get tenure. It just didn't work out, which was a shame.

DE: Was Brian Seidel the head?

TM: The head of the art and design school at the time.

DE: And was Ken Scarlett there?

TM: No, he was at the Gryphon Gallery in the teachers college, which became part of Melbourne University. It started off as Melbourne Teachers College, which then became the State College and now, I think, part of Melbourne University. He was the director of the Gryphon Gallery within that, which in a way I modelled Pit Space on. I felt we could do that sort of thing.

DE: Was there an onus on you to have a turnover of shows of the lecturers' works as well as outside shows and one graduating students show?

TM: There was one annual graduating students show but for the rest I had a free hand. For example, I was able to put on a show on a visiting lecturer from Sweden and I gave her an opportunity to show her glasswork, Eva Amberg. So there was craft, painting, performance art.

DE: How did you find the change? The change, say, from large shows with admittedly not very long lead-in times but much longer than perhaps a week at an art college gallery to change exhibitions.

TM: We had a turnover every three or four weeks. It was a smallish space. I didn't have any staff so I was doing most of it myself. I did get one assistant, John Pitman, who was great. He was like a technician, that was his role, but it was really going back to absolute basics.

DE: Had it been a gallery before this?

TM: No, it had been a painting studio that I had said, 'Look, this will do as a gallery. Can I do this, this and this?' So it was an innovation, and good fun to do, very exciting. The salary was great, better than Mildura, superannuation for the first time, and it was nice to be in an academic institution, so close to La Trobe [University]. I did some subjects over there part-time, pre-history. It was lovely, I was really enjoying it, but it was frustrating because I hadn't been in schools for a long time and I found it was a ragged kind of organisation. All of the lecturers doing their own thing with no sense of doing things together. A gallery is much more focused, everybody is focused on 'the show must go on', whereas I was doing a little sideshow, but it was better than being unemployed!

DE: Or staying in Mildura?

TM: Well, living in Mildura was different to living down in Melbourne, and we had to get a house set up, and my wife had to change jobs, and my two girls had to go to school. It was good for them because they needed to finish their secondary education in Melbourne.

DE: So you had already been thinking of sending them to school in Melbourne?

TM: No, not really, not until the crisis occurred. That was an unforeseen benefit. This show [1981] was great fun and it brought a whole lot of people together, and we did put out a follow-up booklet. We had a sculptors conference and you must have seen that. That is where they criticised the 1981 show, the Mildura shows, everything. We had a big dinner and they all stood up and we workshopped it. They would stand up, table by table, and read out their comments, and I documented the whole thing. It is really important for anybody who is studying Australian art. I will give you one. You can keep it. It is not all flattering but you will find a lot of the things we have been talking about reflected in it. There is Noel Hutchison and Kevin Mortensen, various people standing up and talking about things, Colin Suggett, Anita Aarons – she taught me, I was in her sculpture class at teachers college.

DE: How did you assemble the 1981 show? Did you have it spread over ...?

TM: Spread over the whole campus of Phillip Institute and La Trobe University. It was primarily an outdoor exhibition. And it was awful running the show because students can wander around and break things.

DE: Did you have graffiti problems?

TM: Little ones. Worse than I had ever had at Mildura. That upset me a bit, but not really bad by any standards. Just smart-arse engineering students walking past and cutting strings that held sculptures, that sort of thing. And they stole Tony Trembath's sheep, we never got that back. Tony was very upset at that.

[Looking at catalogue] That one I remember, the late Steve Leishman. He put that lovely spider-web thing together and somebody cut the strings. He has died since, that lovely young man.

DE: That's good [referring to the catalogue]. There is a map in it.

TM: Yes. Keep your eyes out for it because it was a vast show, too vast.

DE: How long did it take you to set up? A month before?

TM: It took a long time. I can't remember now. It was exhausting work from sunrise to sunset, and various sculptors were coming up and bashing away at stuff and needing things and going on with stuff.

DE: The next Australian Sculpture Triennial, the Graeme Sturgeon one at the NGV, was reduced by about 75 percent, I should think. But 1981 achieved what you wanted to achieve?

TM: It didn't have the collegiate feeling of Mildura. That was the big disappointment and a lot of the artists complained of that, talked about that as their problem as well as my problem, and the people in Melbourne all went home at night. They weren't camping out as in Mildura.

DE: It raises questions of expectations.

TM: The expectations were very high, yes. Well, it was really to have been a transfer of the Mildura Triennials to Melbourne.

DE: But there does need to be a certain level of proactivity on the artists' side.

TM: Hell, yes. We kept very silent about that one. I thought if you are not going to invite people back to your house and form good relationships ... The New Zealanders were very prominent in that show. They came over in a great group. Some of them had been in Mildura too and really loved the Mildura experience. They began to rattle their sabres too, thinking they weren't getting a fair share. They had a curatorial guy with them as well, who I took a dislike to. He brought his girlfriend along and insisted on her being in the show, without being invited. We had a real head-to-head over that, which was unnecessary as she was actually quite a good artist but I didn't know that about her. By that stage we were all pretty tense.

DE: I think to curate contemporary shows is a tense business. What then was your sense – apart from having to deal with all the practicalities of the show – of the shifts sculptors were having to grapple with as they headed into the 80s?

TM: Well, some of them were talking about being paid to work too, which was a new thing appearing on the horizon that I hadn't even thought about, the idea of fees. I always emphasised to the Mildura people that they were getting these artists for nothing. It was costing them [the artists] money. What are they getting in return? Anytime I got any of this nonsense being slung at the artists, I tried to act as a guardian for the artists as best I could. I pointed out that they were people like anyone else, that they were not going to get rich on this, they were not trading. Why should they come to Mildura anyway? We really have to be very grateful and make them feel very welcome. I know that they felt welcome by the gallery but there were nights when these artists would knock on my door and say, 'We are in trouble, Tom. We got picked up for hash', or 'The police have been asking us questions we can't answer. Can you come down?' There were those things. Going to a 'hick country town' from the 'big city', and being at Easter of course, the picking season when a lot of itinerants were around, and the artists didn't look any different from these strangers in the town 'who might steal things or whatever' – that made it all the more exciting. You see films about the deep south in America and you think of the deep north in Victoria [laughter], with the new religions.

DE: You had them?

TM: Oh yes, two of my councillors.

DE: Even more remarkable, perhaps, that they went as far as they did then with the shows.

TM: Yes, you can only be thankful.

DE: Were these religious councillors spearheading a group that simply didn't see any longer what the benefit of the Mildura Triennial was?

TM: Yes, that's so, because they weren't paying for it as much. I got it to the stage where all the money was coming from state and federal sources primarily, and sponsors, and the actual city council wasn't funding it so they felt they were losing control. I was often saying to them that, 'You are trying to tell people that there is no blood letting, but what right have you got to do that? This is sponsored by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, by the Victorian government. They don't see anything wrong. What on earth have we got [to complain about]?' I shouldn't have said that. I should have kept that quiet. I shouldn't have given the impression that the gallery was not theirs, that it was being taken over by bigger interests, which is what they must have perceived it as. A more diplomatic approach would have been to compromise a bit.

DE: But that would have led to a great deal of trouble on the other side, wouldn't it?

TM: Well, the artists ... You had to keep the artists on side.

DE: And your professional self-respect.

TM: Well, I got sacked for it, which is the ultimate [laughs]. I mean they did say, 'You can resign, Mr McCullough, or we'll sack you', virtually that, and I did resign in the end, and they accepted my resignation. It was a simple decision. 'Mr McCullough, you are no longer welcome.' It was very sad and, as I say, I still have horrible nightmares. I went to Indonesia for a month to get away from the whole thing

DE: It sounds ghastly. And reading from the outside, and in whiteboard speak, you had developed a brand, so it is interesting to see that, in your absence, they decide to carry on. And it was an interesting thing for them to commission that book on the Mildura shows from Graeme Sturgeon in 1982, wasn't it?

TM: That was another marker that it was 'our show', and that was done to restore some of the kudos for the exhibition.

DE: Which is establishing certain battle lines, which are unnecessary. But it is also a time, isn't it, when government sponsorship regimes are moving back to the centre, into cities, not so interested any more in a regional thrust?

TM: Well, they stopped their grants for Mildura when I left, and they had to be renegotiated, whereas before it was ongoing.

DE: That makes sense as you are centrally tied to the project, aren't you?

TM: I think for the Victorian Government, it was a regional thing, whereas for the Visual Arts Board, they certainly made their decisions much more realistically: will it succeed or not? I don't know whether they ever went back to supporting Mildura.

DE: So it got to be personally nasty?

TM: I was pretty badly depressed for a few years. It hurt very badly. Because, being a migrant, I took Mildura as my home. It was a shattering thing, but all of the artists knew it. I was so well supported by the artists, it was tremendous. I got more support from them, uncalled for, they just volunteered, and a lot of them said, 'We will never show in Mildura again', and there were a lot who just stepped away from it, and I felt that was the best compliment one could have. But there was this awful feeling of bloody failure, that I had

played the wrong moves when I could have been a lot more discreet. And it was just a bad feeling, that I was letting the artists down too because they had had a great environment to work in, and suddenly that went up in smoke and it wasn't their fault; it was really the fault of the politics on the curatorial side. I could have changed things, and it would have been a different scenario.

DE: Maybe you couldn't have. I know one scrolls back over one's decisions but it could well have been that the forces which had come onto the council simply did not want a contemporary art show anymore. There might have been nothing you could do but go back to 1964.

TM: Yes, which is what happened, stylistically, and Michel Sourgnès [next curator of the Mildura Sculpture Triennial] told them what they wanted to hear.

DE: And was perhaps hung, drawn and quartered curatorially on the basis of it, and then went to Queensland, but not for very long, I think, before he became a dealer. So I think it might have been a bit tricky for him.

TM: We had a reunion in Mildura. The interesting thing is that there was a Frenchman [Sourgnès] doing it, but there had been a Dutchman before me, and an Australian before that, and we were all back together at a reunion in Mildura and it was great. It was mainly the art people. I had never met the original director, Rex Bramleigh, until he came to that reunion. He was a World War II veteran.

DE: I presume he was largely presiding over the historic house which preceded the arts centre.

TM: Yes, Rio Vista Art Gallery and Museum.

DE: What did Van Hattum go on to do?

TM: He went back to Britain. I got a lovely letter from him, asking if there was anything he could do. He did not go on and do much in the art world. He is dead now. He was quite a good portrait painter, in a tie and jacket, very Dutch.

DE: What about DDart? [A British performance group, pronounced De-Dart, which came to Australia through McCullough]

TM: I got an email from Ray Richards yesterday and he wants to take a group of people to England who are interested in crop circles and they are going to have a ceremony at Stonehenge.

DE: Yesterday! So they [DDart] are still going?

TM: No, they have split up since. There were two of them, Dennis de Groot and Ray Richards.

DE: Did you meet them by putting on a performance at Pit Space?

TM: Yes, I got them out to Australia to do that performance through a VAB [Visual Arts Board] grant.

DE: Did you find at Pit Space that performance became a very strong interest of yours or was it just in the mix?

TM: In the mix really. Performance was very big in the 70s and you didn't ignore it, and some object sculptors were involved in performances as part of their work. I had no trouble with it.

DE: How did you get involved with DDart?

TM: I am trying to remember. I think they made the approach to me. They must have heard of me through Mildura, and I had been to England and I had brought some young sculptors' work from England to Australia, or maybe it was through the British Council, which sponsored me to go around England. Ray has a brother-in-law in Melbourne so that was probably the inspiration to come to Melbourne, and Ray is a pretty good mover, very shrewd. So Ray and Dennis came out as artists in residence and did a wonderful eight weeks, and if you look in our hallway you will see one of their fragments from a performance they did at the National Gallery of Victoria. So I organised performances for them at the NGV as well as Pit Space and ...

DE: They made quite a splash?

TM: It was fantastic. And they had already done performances around England and were on the cover of *Art International* – good credentials. Crazy things they did, based on English folk art and Morris dancing, as well as other things. But they were graduates from respectable colleges and two delightful young men who stayed in our house at Eaglemont, same as in Mildura. We used to have a cottage up there where artists would stay as artists in residence, a family-oriented thing. I think [our daughter] Fiona fell in love with one of them and subsequently went over to England and they worked together, but she subsequently saw the light and ended up marrying a much more sensible Australian. It was great. They were great fun. I was their official photographer so I went out on their gigs at Northcote markets, working-class areas. When I saw them in England I saw them at Sheffield or somewhere like that and I could see they were in their element in areas like that. Ray did a performance at one stage where he was totally nude. I had to go to court to give a character reference for him against a charge of obscenity. But Ray is now settled in Queensland. He is very much a teacher in the school of crystallography and mysticism and vibrations from the ether. His name now is Raym and his lovely wife is Chiccan and they do global healing and so on. Whereas Dennis de Groot is still in England. They split when Ray decided to migrate back to Australia. Dennis does designs for television. He is a very talented designer.

DE: You were described at one point as their agent.

TM: I was not employed. I was self-employed after Pit Space and so I became Inter-arts. I became an incorporated company and I ran a little craft shop here in Mount Martha. I did consultancies for museums, historical, as well as for art galleries, mainly around Victoria, just self-employed and I was finishing a teaching degree. I did quite a bit of study when I did my Graduate Diploma in Museum Studies. Towards the end of that, the Melbourne Cricket Ground [MCG] wanted to set up the Australian Gallery of Sport and I became the inaugural director of that, a total change.

DE: You would need to bring the same aesthetic sense and principles to that.

TM: Still putting on shows and putting labels up. That was for a good nine years and we also added an Olympic museum to it, and I went to Greece and lectured on sport history to the Greeks. It was great fun because I really wasn't a sporty person.

DE: But sport history in Australia might be interesting. You couldn't get a topic that more people would have more general interest in.

TM: It was great. I bought a series of paintings – art and sport – and started a little collection at the MCG and I noticed that that is going ahead because they are getting sponsors for outdoor sculptures there. There was nothing in the collection when I started and we ended up with thousands of documents and artifacts, and I introduced computerised registration methods etc. I had a staff of 15, a far different set up even to Mildura, and a budget of about \$2 million a year, which wasn't bad in those days, and travel. I totally cut myself off from the art world when I was focusing on sport in those years. Then retirement came up, and I worked part-time for ten years, looking after the Red Cross Archives [in the North Melbourne area]. That was another time of consultancy. They wanted to set up a museum of the Red Cross and ten years later I retired as their archivist. They never achieved a museum.

[End]