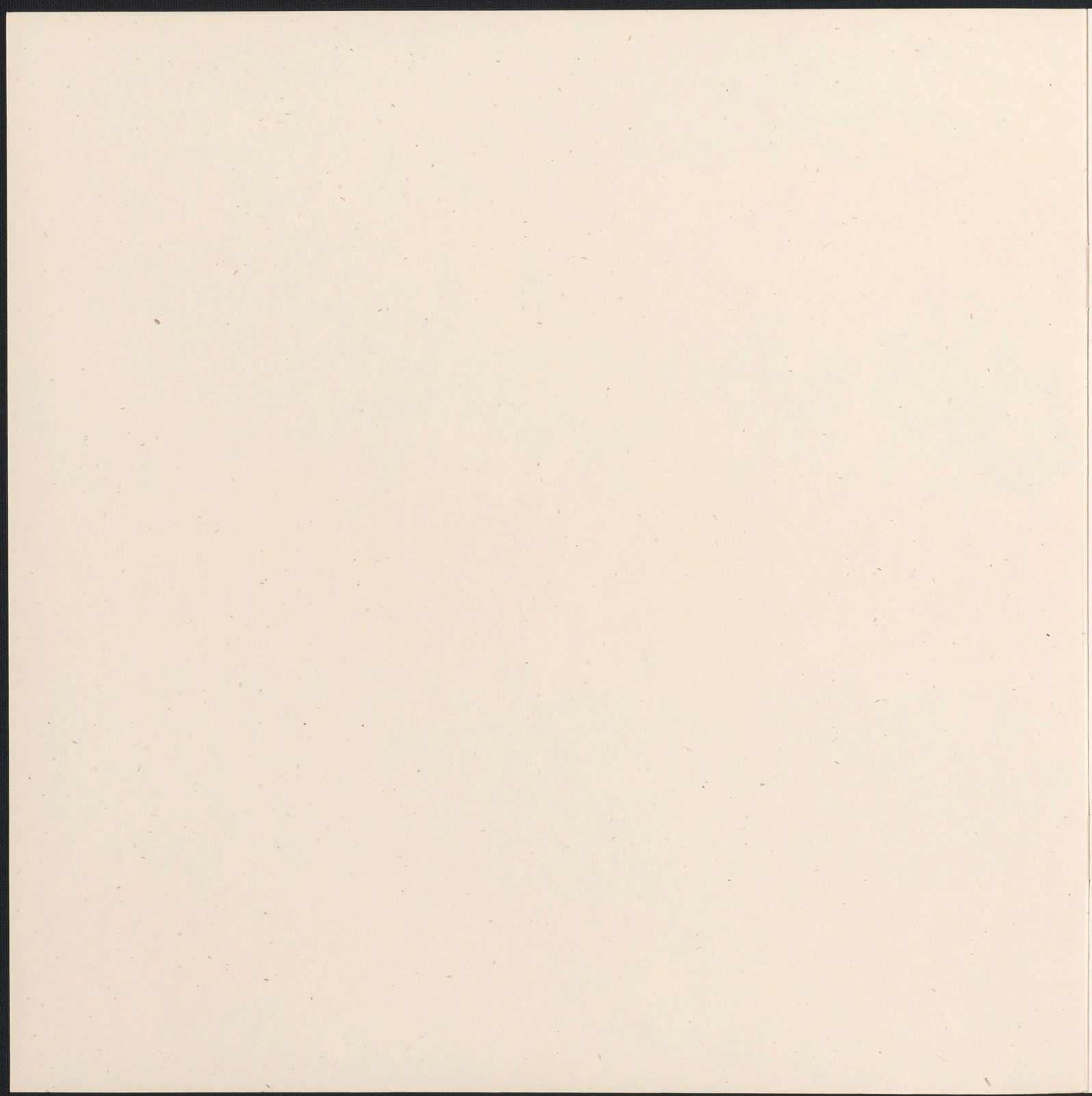


n e c e s s a r y
c o r r e c t i o n

COLIN McCAHON

STEPHEN BAMBURY

HELMUT FEDERLE



13 SEPTEMBER - 7 DECEMBER 1997

n e c e s s a r y
c o r r e c t i o n

COLIN MCCAHOON

STEPHEN BAMBURY

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AUCKLAND
ART
GALLERY

TOI O TĀMAKI



INTRODUCTION

Since opening in 1995, the Auckland Art Gallery's New Gallery has maintained two ongoing programmes: one of artist's projects of new works, the other of exhibitions dedicated to furthering understanding of New Zealand's greatest twentieth century painter, Colin McCahon. Stephen Bambury's project in the Colin McCahon Room is the first occasion on which these programmes have met, and the result is an exhibition that extends the boundaries of what we have traditionally understood an artist's project to be, and one that has bought new and special insights into the work of McCahon.

By placing McCahon's work in context with his own and that of leading Swiss artist Helmut Federle, Bambury presents McCahon as a figure at the centre of a dialogue about painting at the end of the twentieth century, not just in New Zealand, but internationally. The Gallery is deeply committed to furthering McCahon's reputation and Bambury's particular vision for this project was therefore one we readily embraced. I thank him for the considerable energy he has invested in the project, and congratulate him on the result.

The Gallery is grateful too for the support shown by Helmut Federle and the assistance given on his behalf by Rosemarie Schwärzwalder of Galerie nächst St Stephan in Vienna, and Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland. The generosity shown by these galleries has been matched by the private lenders to the exhibition and we are, as ever grateful to them. Our thanks must also go to the McCahon Family. The Colin McCahon Room is very much a partnership between the Gallery and the McCahon Family, and their support of this exhibition has been crucial to its development.

I would like to extend my congratulations to the writers who have contributed so insightfully to this publication: the Gallery's Curator of Contemporary New Zealand art, William McAloon, and independent curator and authority on McCahon, Dr Wystan Curnow. For Bambury, this publication was always intended as more than a mere document of an exhibition, but something that would continue and expand its dialogues. Both essays clearly do that. Lastly, special thanks must go to Jenny Gibbs who has made a generous contribution to the funding of this publication, showing, as always, her very real enthusiasm and practical support for artists and contemporary art.

Chris Saines

DIRECTOR

NECESSARY PROTECTION WYSTAN CURNOW

Four paintings, three painters. A rectangular room, the space of which is divided by two columns. Two paintings, which are installed opposite (more or less) one another on the longer walls, are by Stephen Bambury. They make a pair, splitting up the other two paintings hanging on the end walls. These are by Colin McCahon and Helmut Federle; they were chosen, and installed in this fashion, by Stephen Bambury.

This is an unusual circumstance: neither a group show, nor a solo exhibition, but something of both. Obviously, it is more about Bambury than McCahon or Federle, but equally obvious in that all four works resemble one another rather closely. Moving around the room, subliminally noting the "cuts" caused by the columns, all four seem to hold hands, as if the squares in each work were magnetically drawn to the squares adjacent to them in the others. Bambury's show is about the relation of his work to the work of others, even about difference and relation as such. Specifically, it addresses the conjunction between the coincidental similarity of Federle's *Basics on Composition* series to McCahon's *Necessary Protection* works, and the "correction" offered by his own "surrogates". Ordinarily we are presented with group shows which presuppose something - usually something far less particular - in common, or with solo exhibitions which presuppose something can be made of a single artist's work taken in isolation. Bambury's show breaks with this pattern, which is equally a way of thinking, by giving us a solo show which asks that his work be seen and understood, in relation.

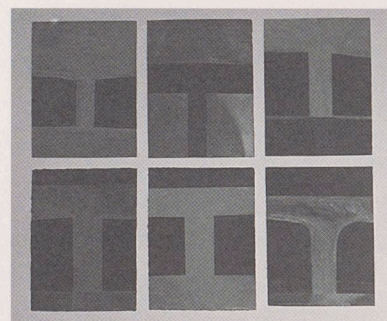
I want to call the way of thinking behind Bambury's project post-formalist. *Necessary Correction* serves to clarify a confusion around his work and so many

Colin McCahon

Necessary protection

installation at Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, 1971

photograph: Auckland Art Gallery



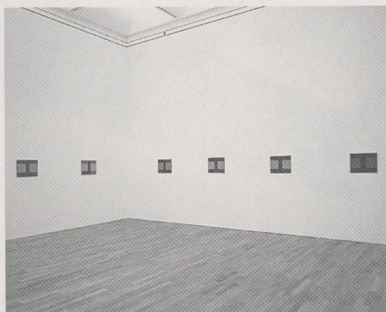
others which results from the habit of collapsing modernism and abstraction into formalism. By displaying, and indeed cultivating, his derivations and affinities, Bambury insists on the connectedness of his work to that of others and theirs to his. In as much as his project deliberately questions the principle of the visual self-sufficiency, the autonomy, of the art object, it is post-formalist. Just as this exhibition is determinedly abstract, it not only claims a future for abstract painting after formalism, but implies connections to a modernism that eludes the formalist account.

What promoted Bambury's *Necessary Correction* series and this project, was a particular figure or sign used by McCahon. It is shaped like the capital letter "I" or perhaps the Roman number one. A letter, a numeral, and in English at least, a word. The first person singular, I. Because the boundaries of both the figure and its ground coincide with the edges of the paintings, there is some ambiguity as to which is figure and which is ground. All three artists make conspicuous use of this ambiguity both in their series represented in *Necessary Correction* and elsewhere. Anyway, with this particular McCahon, it is less the "I" of the sky, more the cliffs of "necessary protection" we see as figure. And yet McCahon himself spoke of 'the "I" of the sky' and added that it, and 'falling light and enlightened land, is also ONE.'

Federle's figure has a different source. His Basics on Composition stem from an earlier work, *Liegendes H (1)* or *Supine H (1)*; as a result it is not usually discussed in terms of the capital "I". However, many of Federle's abstractions are based on his initials, "H" and "F", or a combination of them. So whatever "mis-takes" or "corrections" we may make in the reading of this figure, we are left with a *linguistic* sign, one signifying *identity*. Of course, language signs do not

opposite page
Necessary Correction
installation at Auckland Art Gallery, 1997
photograph: Auckland Art Gallery





Helmut Federle

Basics on composition

installation at Kunstmuseum, Bonn, 1993

photograph: Reni Hanson, Bonn

get their meaning from their shape, but from systems of "arbitrary" conventions outside the painting. Were it not for Bambury's post-formalist stance, it might seem contradictory and ironic that the very sign that speaks of identity brings into question the visual self-sufficiency of the painting it is formally more or less identical with.

On the other hand, as a composition this figure is formally singular, possessing a conspicuous internal coherence. Upside down, these paintings are more or less the same, even the McCahon, give or take a few birds in the sky or waves at the cliff base. Or, to take this further, divide the composition in half, either vertically or horizontally as Bambury does in fact, and each half is the mirror image of the other. So the figure seems one with the object that is the painting and enhances its claim as a sign of presence, even as it remains simultaneously one with the word.

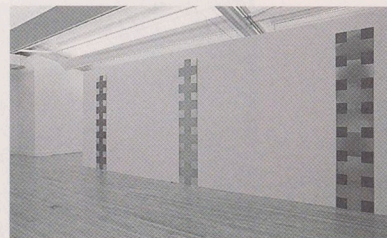
'The possibility to see (read) letters or known signs', writes Erich Franz of Federle's *Basics*, 'in the constructive (i.e. formal) lines means an unheard of (sic) sacrilege in the sense of an autonomous formal structure... But the readable identity is just as little guaranteed as the constructive one;... what we see or read is, therefore, neither "letter" nor "form" but the always new experience of its unexpected transformation.'¹ The sheer confidence and speed of McCahon's performance of the figure, the subtle "breathing" Federle's brushwork imparts to its surface, the translucent amber fluidity which embodies it in Bambury's works, all signify that potential for transformation. In sum, it must be the mobility of this figure, its peculiar capacity to signify simultaneously the idea of identity in more than one code, that explains its separate discovery by two abstract painters uneasy with formalism, and the discovery of that coincidence by a third similarly uneasy.

1. 'The picture Originates in the Viewer's Eye' Helmut Federle
Kunstmuseum, Bonn, 1996, p 108

Besides the resistance to formalism Bambury shares with his companions, *Necessary Correction* also refers to the inevitable differences he has with them. It serves, for instance, to remove any suggestion of obsequious homage to McCahon. There is no face-off of first person singulars, however, for Bambury does not suffer difference like McCahon, or seem to work in its shadow like Federle. Difference has to do with the conditions of relation in a world of unstable identities; as such Bambury seems to welcome it, even regarding it as a basis for transformative and generative practice.

In one of his *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness* canvases, McCahon extends the two "squares" to the lower edge of the canvas, so that the "I" figure appears cropped and in the shape of a "T". 'The "T" of the sky,' he wrote, 'and light falling into a dark landscape, is also the T of the Tau or Old Testament or Egyptian Cross.' For McCahon, the crucifixion is the sign of difference and it is contained within the figure of identity. With their glowing ambers, Bambury's paintings do recall *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness* and their ginger-browns; its Tau cross appears in them as well, however they do not ask for transcendent protection. You can call Bambury a devotee of images of the spirit, even an idolater's idolater, but certainly not a troubled agnostic. Hence the internal division, or cropping, of his *Necessary Correction* which suggests the mirrored Tau cross, should direct us elsewhere. Perhaps to the large multi-part works like the "Chakras" in which "I's" and crosses alternate, overlap, swap figure and ground in open-ended extension. Here both are subsumed by a ladder-like figure, which we might well now read as "one plus one plus one plus..." This is, I hazard, Bambury's current proposal, and our yardstick for measuring his relations to McCahon and to Federle.

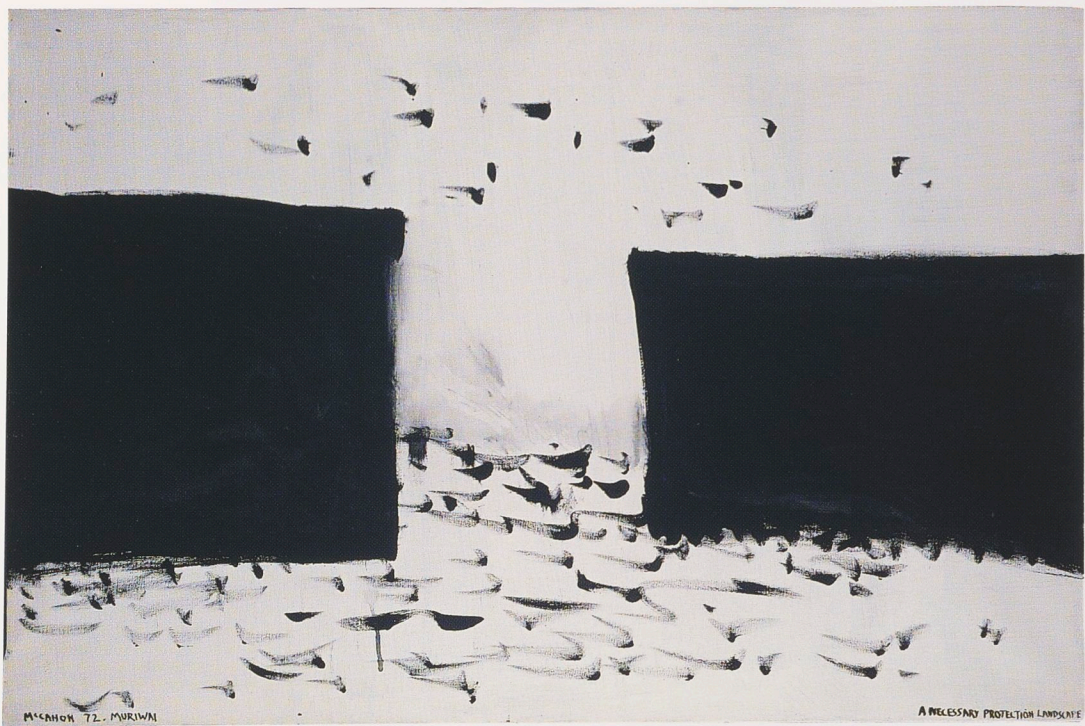
Stephen Bambury
installation at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1993
photograph: Bryan James



Necessary Correction is Bambury's project. McCahon and Federle are his guests, yet the site remains the Colin McCahon Room and Bambury its first guest artist-curator. This double guest-host relationship presented him with a challenge he took to be a crucial aspect of the project. When, some years ago, I myself first saw these *Basics on Composition* works, I took pictures of them because they recalled McCahon. That was in Paris. Only a New Zealander or an Australian is likely to mistake a Federle for a McCahon, and probably only in New Zealand. Bambury has brought one here in order that - but not only that - it would be so mistaken, and so made welcome.

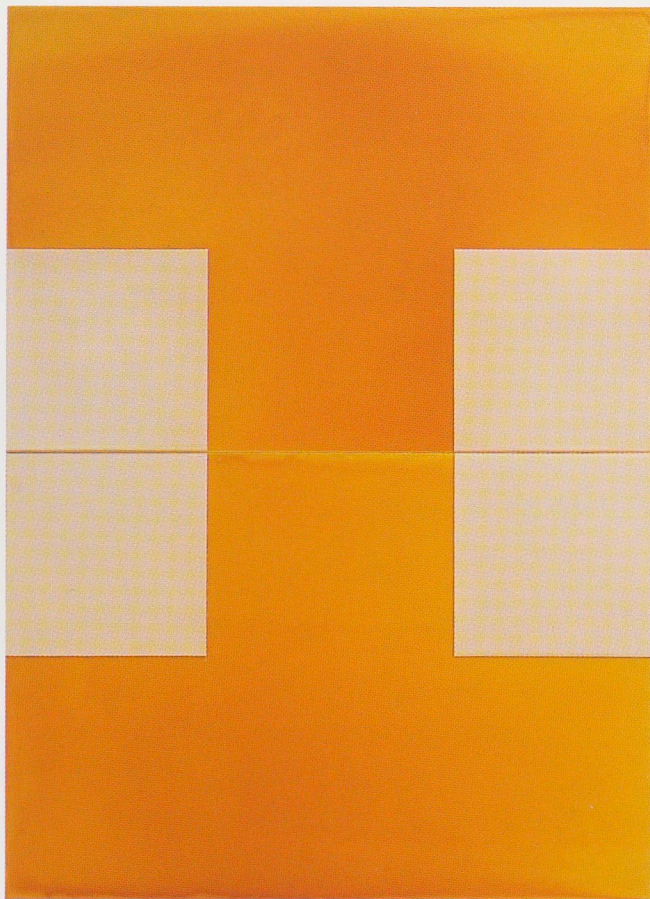
Bambury's project is not unique. Some years ago, the Australian artist Imants Tillers undertook a project strangely similar to this at the National Art Gallery Shed II. Known for his "appropriations", he selected an international "group show" of his own works which was nevertheless dominated by his versions of McCahon. In the centre, he installed two paintings side by side: *The Letter I* and *The Letter T*. These too were McCahon surrogates, but they spelt out the initials of Imants Tillers.

Like Tillers, Bambury appreciates the necessity of resisting, or "correcting", the centripetal pull of the international art system, by among other means, constructing alternative discursive models of it organised around McCahon. Bambury says that it was the experience of working as an artist in Europe that first compelled him to closely consider his relation to McCahon. The path he has taken to and through McCahon's achievement is unique, and while it does not account for the fact that he is now making his finest work it does explain something of its character. Bambury has handsomely repaid the hospitality of the McCahon Room, and honoured his Swiss guest with the gift of a history, a genealogy, elsewhere denied him.

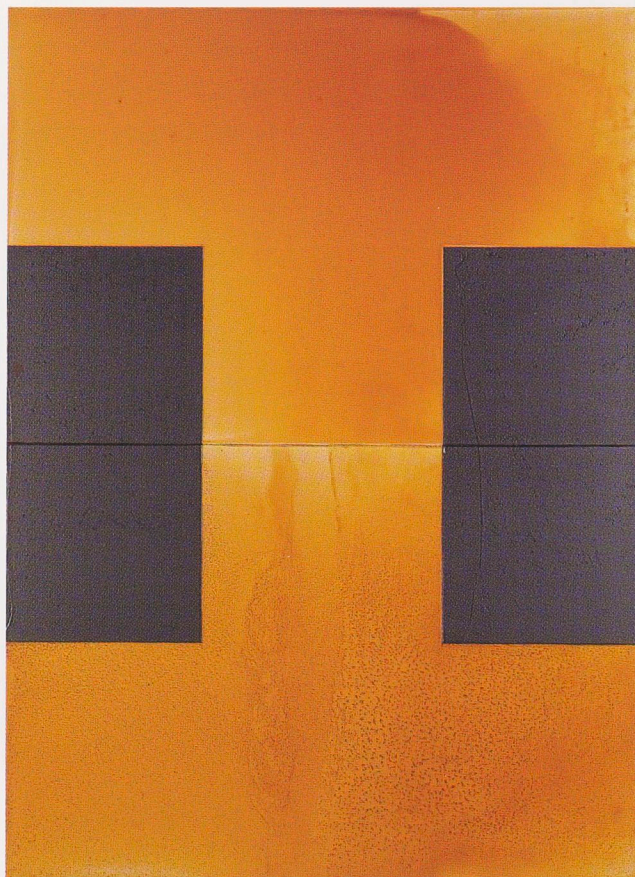


Colin McCahon

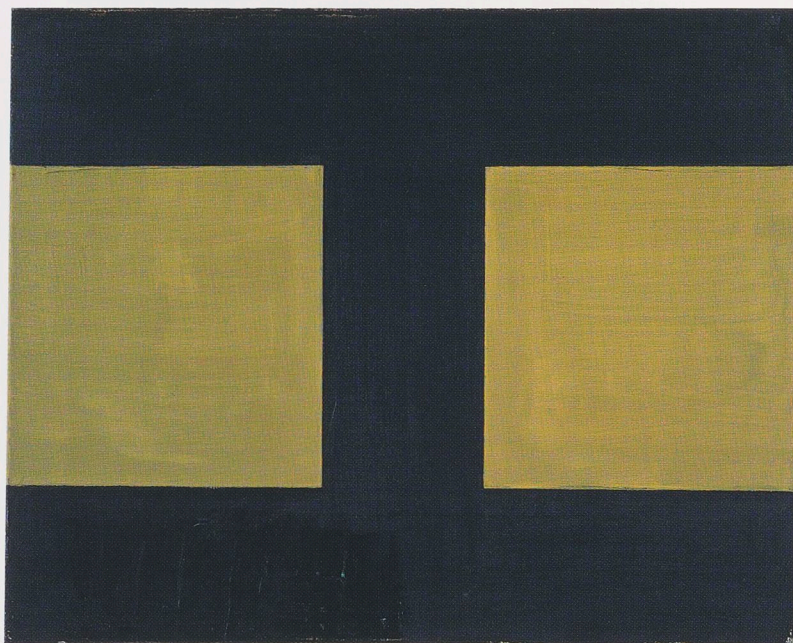
A Necessary protection landscape 1972



Stephen Bambury
Necessary Correction VII 1995



Stephen Bambury
Necessary Correction 1994



Helmut Federle

Basics on composition XXXVII (Dedication Franz Marc) 1992

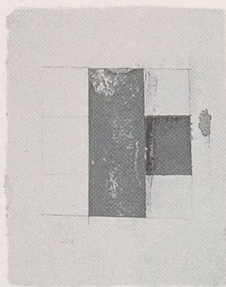
BORDER CROSSINGS WILLIAM McALOON

In a notebook worked on in Paris in 1991, Bambury sketched a plan for a still-as-yet unrealised work, the title of which is *Friendly abstract painting*. The painting had emerged, apparently without rupture, from Bambury's continuing investigation of Malevich's Suprematist cross. Displacing Malevich's horizontal and vertical elements, his positive and negative spaces, Bambury's painting would contain in it two forms divided by a border. The forms were the letter "H" and the letter "I".

In the genesis and realisation of Stephen Bambury's artist's project *Necessary Correction*, various borders¹ were encountered and crossed. Geographies and time zones, art histories and cultural proprieties: all have been negotiated in various ways. Such discursiveness is an essential component of the larger nature of Bambury's project - that is, its life beyond the temporality of an exhibition - and it is this discursiveness that I will examine here.

In hindsight, it is obvious that the letter forms in *Friendly abstract painting* prefigure Bambury's *Necessary Correction* series. Possibly to be turned on their side, they were certainly not to be emptied of their significance. Saying "HI", they offered a greeting to the two artists whose works Bambury would bring together alongside his own in Auckland six years later: Helmut Federle and Colin McCahon. Combining the "H" of Federle's *Basics on Composition* series and the "I" of McCahon's *Necessary Protection*, the imagined work is an example of what Bambury has characterised as his "soft appropriation". In Bambury's terms, this is an appropriation that engages others' works without invading them, pointing at once towards and away from both himself and the "appropriated" artist.

1. The notion of the art world's borders and the possibility of movement across them is here derived from Wystan Curnow ('The Shining Cuckoo' *Interpreting contemporary art* ed. Stephen Bann and William Allen, Reaktion Books, 1991, pp. 27-46).



Stephen Bambury
not titled 1989

mixed media and graphite on handmade paper 320 x 250
collection of the artist
photograph: Studio Guerin

opposite page

Necessary Correction

installation at Auckland Art Gallery, 1997
photograph: Auckland Art Gallery

2. The term is Rosalind Krauss's, and is used by Curnow in his 'McCahon and signs' (Colin McCahon: *Gates and journeys* Auckland City Art Gallery, 1989, pp. 41-54.)

3. Bambury had first encountered Federle's work in Sydney at the 1988 Biennial *From the Southern Cross: A world view of art c. 1940 - 1988*. The exhibition also included McCahon's work. The three artists have passed each other at various points, such as Bambury's inclusion with Federle in the 1991 exhibition *eikon=das Bild: Christliche Ikonen und moderne Kunst* at the Stiftung für Konkrete Kunst in Reutlingen. Works by Bambury and McCahon have been exhibited together in New Zealand on several occasions.

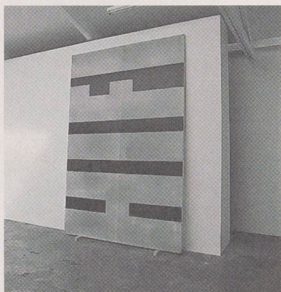
The similarities and differences of Federle's and McCahon's use of letter forms are the subject of Wytan Curnow's contribution to this catalogue. Curnow positions Bambury - as Bambury would himself - between the two: between Federle's use of textual and other signs, and McCahon's declaration of the divine through the sign of the cross and the "I" of God. Bambury engages with both, while accepting fully the terms of neither. It is in this ambivalence - an "inbetween-ness" - and the crossing of borders, that the significance of Bambury's work, and the workings of his project in the Colin McCahon Room, are defined.

That the unrealised *Friendly abstract painting* returns as the starting point for *Necessary Correction* is an example of this process. Its greeting was to two very different artists - one Swiss, cosmopolitan and riding high in the international art world; the other bound by provincialism and largely unknown in that world, but nonetheless essential to an unwritten history of impure modernism.² And its invitation was a new one: while each had passed the other in various exhibitions and publications, the work of all three had never before been seen together.³

If the appropriations in *Friendly abstract painting* represented a minor incursion across art's borders, the first border that Bambury fully transgressed with *Necessary Correction* was the notion of the artist's project itself. In the hierarchy of exhibitions a project customarily falls midway between retrospective and group show. An artist's project begins with an invitation being extended by the Gallery to the artist, funding provided and a new body of work produced, exhibited and accompanied by a catalogue. My invitation to Bambury to present a project was the prompt for him to ask a series of questions.

Firstly, asked Bambury, why did new work have to be made, why not instead re-figure existing work into the new context of a project, and make that re-figuring





Stephen Bambury
Ideogram (II) 1995
 resin, graphite, fabric and timber 2970 x 2000
 private collection
 photograph: Stephen Bambury

the project? Knowing Bambury's interest in the shaping nature that architecture and gallery conventions of display have on art works, I felt this to be an approach with considerable potential. The dialogue continued between artist and curator: why just Bambury? Could he not extend the invitation to others, taking the role of artist-curator rather than artist-creator? And so the greeting and invitation that had already been extended to Federle and McCahon in *Friendly abstract painting* finally went out to them in a real form. And lastly, and most audaciously - and at my behest - why not have the project in the McCahon Room itself, a space hitherto dedicated solely to the New Zealand master's work?

After all, Bambury's project and the *Necessary Correction* works upon which it is founded are laden with references to McCahon. Their significance, and the relationships between the three artists works would be most sharply lit in the context of the McCahon Room. And then another push at the border: because the Gallery was not funding Bambury to make new work, could not part of the work be this catalogue, larger and more expansive than customarily allowed? Such a catalogue could then take McCahon to Federle - and Bambury - to Europe, even if the exhibition itself would not travel there.

None of this was to be achieved straightforwardly, of course. The process of negotiation - between artist and curator, curator and Gallery, artist and dealers, Gallery and estates, Gallery and dealers - became the equivalent for Bambury of making a new work in his studio: engaging, exciting, precarious and with the possibility of failure at every point. Such processes became an integral part of the larger project.

That the initial foundations of *Necessary Correction* were laid far away from the Auckland context of its realisation is more than a tangent in this story. In a very

real sense the project concerns the movement of artists and paintings across borders, and the effects such border crossings have on both. A decade before arriving in Paris, Bambury made his first pilgrimage to New York in 1980, and there encountered the shock of provincialism: that he was in no way the equal participant in the art world's dialogues as he had imagined. In New Zealand, Bambury had found abstraction to be marginalised by a McCahon-led nationalist discourse.⁴ If he was not involved in a dialogue with New York, the very possibility of painting itself was for Bambury subject to question.

Federle too had a similar crisis visiting New York, coincidentally in the same year as Bambury. The Swiss artist's response was a redefinition of his own European geometric heritage through the formal tenets of American minimalism - serial composition, for example - and the heroic impulses of abstract expressionism - in the scale of his work and in what he has called his "suicide colours".⁵

Abstract expressionism made a profound impact on McCahon when he visited the United States twenty years earlier, providing him with the impetus to make 'paintings to walk past'. That visit also reinforced for the need words in painting as a means to create what he termed 'more involvement in the human situation'.⁶ McCahon's work would continue to be informed by events from across the art world border - his engagement with conceptualism and *arte povera* in the seventies, for example - but always mediated by the artist's own context and intention.⁷ As he said in a letter to a friend in 1979, 'I can't often tell where it comes from but do know that it's in the tradition of all painting.'⁸

By the time he reached Paris in 1989, Bambury had redefined his relationship to McCahon's work, recognising in it ways through modernism's apparent end and the strictures of provincialism - problems that he had been addressing in his own

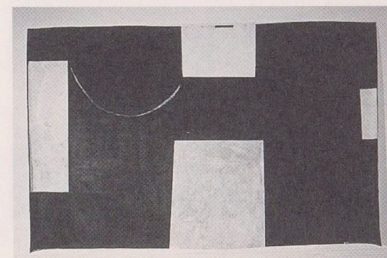
Colin McCahon

Angels and Bed: Hi Fi 1976-77

acrylic on unstretched canvas 3440 x 5440

Auckland Art Gallery collection

photograph: Auckland Art Gallery



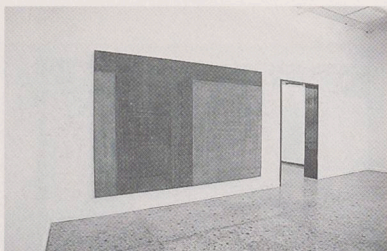
4. For a discussion of this context, see Tony Green essay in the catalogue to Bambury's exhibition *Used geometries* (Centre for Contemporary Art, Hamilton, 1988), and Curnow's 'Seven Painters/The Eighties: The politics of abstraction' *Art New Zealand* 28, 1983, pp. 34-38, 56.

5. Justus Jonas-Edel 'Chronology' *Helmut Federle XLVII Biennale Venedig* Lars Muller, Bern, 1997, p. 180.

6. Both of these statements by McCahon are from his catalogue notes for the exhibition *Colin McCahon: a survey* Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972.

7. I use here Ian Burn's notion of the provincial artist's 'mediation of influence... as a constructed and self conscious process'. See Ian Burn, 'The Re-appropriation of influence' *From the Southern Cross: A world view of art c. 1940 - 1988* The Biennale of Sydney, 1988, pp 41 - 48.

8. McCahon to Agnes Wood, 26 July, 1979. (Auckland Art Gallery Research Library, McCahon Archive, file no. 1.)



Helmut Federle
untitled (September) 1996
 acrylic on canvas 2750 x 4125
 photograph: Andriano A Biondo, Basel

9. Stuart Morgan, 'The Leap of faith' *Artforum* October 1986, pp 86-89.

10. Donald Kuspit, among others has identified in postmodernism a completion or synthesis of modernism's projects. It is a position with which Bambury holds considerable sympathy, and one to which Kuspit aligns Federle. (Donald Kuspit, 'The Abstract self object' in *Abstract painting of Europe and America* Galerie nächst St. Stephan, Rosemarie Schwarzwälder, Vienna/Ritter Verlag, Klagenfurt, 1988.)

11. 'Imants Tillers in Wellington' *Art New Zealand* 51, 1989, p. 52.

work over several years. McCahon, Bambury could now see, had both absorbed and opted out of the modernist canon.⁹ Neither a footnote to modernism, nor a nationalist figure to get past, McCahon had become for Bambury a central figure within painting's present.

Necessary Correction thus brings together three artists who have negotiated different routes past modernism and provincialism, and in doing so have created versions of what might broadly be termed a postmodern abstraction.¹⁰ That the results of these navigations bear such similarity is largely coincidental. But it was this coincidence that convinced Bambury - and the Gallery - that *Necessary Correction* was a viable, indeed, necessary project. Again, this is another of Bambury's border crossings, using something as mundane as visual coincidence as a strategy by which to bring three apparently different - but equally connected - artists into dialogue with each other.

The Australian artist Imants Tillers - well known for his McCahon appropriations - has described the power of the New Zealand artist's work to inexorably draw into its orbit the work of other artists with which it shares a resonance. McCahon's work, Tiller's has said 'becomes an index to the elaboration of other texts.'¹¹ It is in the elaboration other texts that *Necessary Correction* bypasses notions of tradition and influence, and collapses the disjunctions of time and place. Out of this a another context emerges, and it is the primary context in which the work of all three artists exists. Bambury's project - both in his painting and in this exhibition - is, in the end, not merely a dialogue about influence or art history, nor one of appropriation and provincialism. It is these things, certainly, but fundamentally it is concerned with the mysterious and continuing viability of that thing we call painting.

BIOGRAPHIES

COLIN McCahon was born in Timaru, New Zealand in 1919. He studied briefly at the King Edward Technical College in Dunedin, but was largely self taught as an artist. From 1953 to 1963 he was Keeper at Auckland Art Gallery, leaving to assume a teaching position at the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland. He became a full time painter in 1970, and had his first retrospective exhibition at Auckland Art Gallery in 1972. In 1984 an exhibition *I will need words* was shown at the Edinburgh Festival, and as a satellite exhibition to the Sydney Biennale. McCahon died in Auckland in 1987. The Auckland Art Gallery's *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys* opened two years later, and parts of the exhibition were shown at the National Gallery of Australia and the ICA, London. McCahon was given the "Room of Honour" at the Stedelijk Museum in 1996, as part of *The World Over*, an exhibition simultaneously held in Wellington and Amsterdam.

STEPHEN BAMBURY was born in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1951. He studied painting at the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland, graduating in 1975. He exhibited extensively following this, as well as travelling to North America. In 1987 Bambury was Artist in Residence at Victoria College, Melbourne and two years later was awarded the first Moët et Chandon New Zealand Art Foundation Fellowship. He spent a year living at Ardenne, France, and following this lived in Paris for two years, establishing a European context for his work. He continues to exhibit widely in New Zealand and Australia, and now lives in Auckland.

HELMUT FEDERLE was born in Solothurn, Switzerland in 1944. He studied applied arts Allegmeine Gewerbeschule in Basel from 1964 but interrupted his studies with travel through Africa and Eastern Europe and, later, the United States. His first public gallery exhibition was held in 1976, and his reputation began to expand from that point. Federle lived in New York from 1979 to 1980 but returned to Europe to live and work in various cities during the following years while continuing to travel widely, including visits to Tibet and China. Federle began receiving major attention in the late 1980s, with exhibitions in numerous museums and Kunsthallen, culminating in large shows in Paris and Bonn in 1995. He was artist for the Swiss Pavilion at the 1997 Venice Biennale. He lives in New York and Vienna.

EXHIBITED WORKS

Colin McCahon

A Necessary protection landscape 1972

acrylic on canvas 609 x 919

McCahon Family Collection, Auckland Art Gallery

photograph: Auckland Art Gallery

Stephen Bambury

Necessary Correction VII 1995

resin and acrylic on aluminium 1170 x 852

private collection

photograph: Auckland Art Gallery

Stephen Bambury

Necessary Correction 1994

resin and graphite on aluminium 1170 x 852

private collection

photograph: John Pettit

Helmut Federle

Basics on composition XXXVII (Dedication Franz Marc) 1992

oil on canvas 400 x 500

courtesy Galerie nächst St Stephan, Vienna and Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland

photograph: Wolfgang Woessner, Vienna

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