

Imagining Gallery A Sydney

Peter Kennedy interviewed
by Nicholas Chambers

When Gallery A Sydney closed in 1983, I was eight years old. My own engagement with Sydney's art world didn't commence until the 1990s—a time when artist-run initiatives were relatively thick on the ground, contemporary commercial galleries were busy gentrifying the badlands south of Cleveland Street, and museums had active exhibition and acquisition programs for contemporary art. This was a dramatically different environment from that of Gallery A Sydney's formative years!

To me, Gallery A Sydney has come to represent a particular kind of model for a contemporary art dealer—one whose *raison d'être* seems to have been less dictated by financial imperatives than by a desire to support the development of contemporary art in Australia. When invited to contribute a piece to this volume, to write about a gallery that I had never visited, my thoughts turned to those aspects of Gallery A Sydney that seemed tantalisingly beyond my reach, those details not conveyed by slides and exhibition checklists. I wanted to know how the gallery was regarded by the broader art community at the time. What were the conceptual and pragmatic concerns for artists developing exhibitions for Gallery A Sydney? How did exhibitions look and 'feel' to visitors?

The following interview with Peter Kennedy is an attempt to build a sense of these practical, personal and experiential aspects of Gallery A Sydney, and to gain insights into the particular position it occupied in the city's art world of the early 1970s.

Kennedy had a brief, intense period of activity with Gallery A between 1970 and 1971; like the gallery, he played a crucial role in broadening the possibilities for contemporary art in Australia. Kennedy pioneered new media and new exhibition strategies in his own work and was also instrumental in 1971, with Mike Parr, Tim Johnson and others, in establishing *Inhibidress*, an artist-run project space in Woolloomooloo, Sydney, which provided a platform for experimental art practices and fostered exchanges between contemporary artists from Australia and abroad.

The interview has been edited from written correspondence and telephone conversations conducted between October and December 2008. It is accompanied by images drawn from the Gallery A Sydney archive, which Kennedy and I selected and sequenced with the aim of reconstructing a visitor's experience of walking through the exhibitions.

NC: What was your impression of Gallery A as a young artist?

PK: Gallery A was seen by a number of young artists, myself included, as being one of the more adventurous exhibition spaces in Sydney. It was viewed as being on the side of experimentation, perhaps a bit radical and not so 'commercial'. It was considered to be a bit more 'cutting edge' shall we say, to use a contemporary term, than some of the other galleries that were operating at that time. And it certainly did have a reputation for quality.



So I guess there were two aspects: it presented quality shows and some of these were pushing boundaries.

NC: You made your first exhibition with Gallery A Sydney in February 1970, a show called *Neon light installations*.¹ What was the genesis of this work and how did you come about showing it at Gallery A?

PK: I had felt for some time, from about 1965, when I was 20 years old, that Australian art seemed quite moribund in a sense, as if constrained by a particular kind of model or paradigm, and there seemed to be little interest in moving beyond those two traditionally recognised forms of visual expression—painting and sculpture. There were a few exceptions of course, such as Stan Ostoja-Kotkowski in Adelaide and the Hinders in Sydney, who were experimenting with light in different ways. It seemed curious, however, that nobody in Australia was doing what John Cage, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Morris and others were experimenting with in the United States. These were very open-ended experiments with sound, vision and space, and that wasn't happening here. So, from 1965 onwards I was preoccupied with this thought and, I guess, biding my time, waiting for the right moment.

I had shown Max [Hutchinson, director of Gallery A] some paintings that I'd been doing in, I think, 1967, maybe 1968. He'd come to the studio, and he quite liked them and offered me a show. It was up to me to make the next move, to produce the work and then get him back to have a look. But as I proceeded with the paintings I felt a degree of discomfort with them—for various reasons—while at the same time my interests were being dragged in the direction of more open-ended visual modes where experimentation with different materials, ideas and synergies offered new or different possibilities.

NC: The exhibition of February 1970 comprised a series of neon lights in metal channels distributed throughout three rooms of Gallery A Sydney; it would have been one of Australia's earliest examples of 'installation art'. Could you speak about the spatial qualities of the show? Looking at the images of the exhibition, the neons would appear to be concentrated in quite a linear way and aligned with various architectural details of the space.

PK: I think the starting point was the architecture of the gallery. The objective, I think, was how that might be configured in the most interesting way. You know, what surprising outcomes might be achieved, or what were the least obvious options one might explore in regard to articulating or affirming the architecture by using neon as a linear describer of the space.

Left: (top row) of three and first left on second row: Peter Kennedy, *Neon light installations*, Gallery A Sydney, February 1970; (second row, second image from left): Peter Kennedy, *Floor piece*, Gallery A Sydney, November 1970; (second row, first image from left and facing page): Peter Kennedy, *Floor piece*, reconstructed for Luminous, Monash University Gallery, 1993. All images from the artist's archive. Reproduced courtesy the artist.

Following pages: (top row, first two images from left): Peter Kennedy, *Luminal variations, arrangements of fluorescent tubes* (documented while working for Claude Nash, Sydney, March–November 1970; left other image): Peter Kennedy, *Luminal installation*, Gallery A Sydney, March 1971. Gallery A Sydney archive. Reproduced courtesy the artist.









So, in responding to the space in that way I was attempting to enhance or amplify the conjunctions of the various planes—the floors, the walls, and the ceilings. It was these identifiable characteristics that suggested the most appropriate deployment of the neon.

However, it wasn't clear to me how the ambient light would affect the space. You're dealing with something virtually uncontrollable: you don't know how it's going to behave, how it might combine with other colours and so on. In the event, however, it was a pleasant surprise because the very air seemed to be filled with this curious mixture of colours. One had a sense of walking through it.

NC: So the neons described the planar nature of the architecture but ended up having a somewhat unpredictable impact on the gallery's volume ...

PK: It was a volume of light, but it had a very specific effect—a certain physiological effect. It was quite calming, and restorative. The windows were blacked out and the space felt a bit like being inside a rainbow, although without the precise differentiation of the colours of the spectrum. Quite different, of course, from our normal experience of seeing neon signage in the distance or against a night sky.

NC: Given the commercial context of Gallery A, I wondered whether there was any consideration given to how the whole installation or individual pieces might be sold. Could individual elements be separated? Did plans exist to reconstitute the work in a different architectural setting?

PK: In the case of someone purchasing the entire installation I would have redesigned it according to the available space.

As it turned out, one of the elements, a diagonal piece comprising three strips of different coloured neon, was purchased by a partner in the Barry Stern Gallery. It was sold with installation instructions based on the plan of the Gallery A show and I recall going to the client's house in Balmain for dinner and seeing it *in situ*. It was installed according to my plans, in a similar position on the wall as it had been in the exhibition.

NC: In November the same year, 1970, you had a two-person show at Gallery A Sydney with Tim Johnson.²

PK: In that work I used four-foot fluorescent tubes and expanded metal mesh, an industrial product. When the metal sheets were placed in relation to each other various moiré effects resulted.

NC: I remember reading Donald Brook's review of the show. He wrote that the piece 'deprives us of a full two-thirds of the use of a room, and intrudes across a doorway

Below: Peter Kennedy performing *But the force Blackmen, Whitebros* at Gallery A, Charles Street, Woolloomooloo, Sydney, March 1971. Images from Stephen Jones collection. Reproduced courtesy the artist.

The notice advertising the work records that it comprises 'Determinate variables (base text), Indeterminate variables (Sculpture), Random human interference (audience participation), Determinate Interferences (Peter Kennedy repeating a single phrase at 30 minute intervals) ... Admission is 50 cents.'

Right: Detail of Peter Kennedy's *Luminal variables*, an arrangement of fluorescent tubes documented while working for Claude Newen, Sydney, March–November 1970. Gallery A Sydney archive. Reproduced courtesy the artist.





to make us step purposefully.³ Was there a sense in which you aimed to create an obstruction to the normal operations of the gallery?

PK: I think there was some of that going on at the time—the idea of disrupting gallery habits and normal human movement, of artists intervening in viewers' expectations.

NC: Only four months later, in March 1971, you had your second and final solo exhibition at Gallery A Sydney, *Luminal sequences*.⁴

PK: The first thing I would say would be that it was a more complex piece—it combined more elements. I used the same neon light components but stripped away the metal channels from the lengths of neon that I'd used in the first exhibition. So, on this occasion, it was just the bare neon tube mounted directly on the wall. In addition, there were theatre spotlights and a slide projector which projected images of that same environment onto the wall. These elements were on timers that progressed through sequences—generating a whole range of different visual moments or revelations.

NC: Terry Smith reviewed the show for *The Sunday Australian* and the tone of his piece suggests that he discussed it with you at the time. He wrote that the 'third component in the installation is a carousel projector which throws onto the wall images of the neon tubes, other parts of the rooms, and visitors to the exhibition. These will be added to for the artist is regularly taking photographs of the exhibition as it progresses.'⁵

PK: It linked to an idea that was new and somewhat radical at the time—of the role and perceived virtue of documentation. An impulse that was abroad was this idea that one constantly document—and that there was an aesthetic aspect to it. So I think this was probably informing my motivation in regard to the use of projected images. And it was also another way of structuring an idea of time.

NC: So the exhibition was constantly changing then, evolving in a kind of feedback loop with itself. I notice too that some of the projected images were not 'straight' documentation of the installation but depicted people in the space, further reinforcing, perhaps, this evolutionary aspect of the work.

PK: Yes, the exhibition as organic rather than static.

NC: In looking at documentation of the two solo exhibitions at Gallery A, it strikes me that *Luminal sequences* offered quite a different experience for the viewer than *Neon light installations*. If the 1970 show had a 'calming' quality, the 1971 show would seem to have had a disorientating effect. It also seems to call for a more analytical response from the viewer, asking them to think through the relationships between the various elements. I note, for example, that several reviewers of the show refer to their attempts to discern a logic to the sequences and I would imagine wanting to do that as a viewer myself ...

PK: *Neon light installations* was, essentially, an aesthetic experience. Minimal in character, engagement with it would have required openness to one's immersion—both spatial and luminal—in the work and maybe something like transcendence was hovering, on offer, as well. *Luminal sequences* on the other hand probably did appeal more directly to the intellect—certainly the dynamic, fugitive nature of the various sequences was likely to generate inquiry regarding the temporal patterns at work. There was also a register of visual excitement that was not present in *Neon light installations* twelve months earlier.

NC: Finally, I wanted to ask about your exhibition *But the fierce Blackman* held at Inhibodress concurrently with *Luminal sequences* at Gallery A Sydney.⁶ What was the connection between the two shows?

PK: There might have been a tinge of personal ambition lurking there, but the other thing was that there was also a proselytising aspect. I was very close to Tim Johnson at that time and Tim and I felt that we really did want to expand the range of expressive possibilities for art, and these two simultaneous shows were one way of doing it. It constituted a broadening of possibilities, of throwing a wider net over a potentially larger audience. It wasn't just about our own work; it was a broader didactic project that went beyond the personal. So, having the *Luminal sequences* show at Gallery A and *But the fierce Blackman* happening at Inhibodress simultaneously probably accorded with this way of thinking. It was a matter of impact, really, in terms of attracting attention—attention seeking in the best possible way!

END NOTES

1. *Neon light installations*, Gallery A Sydney, 17 February–7 March 1970.
2. *Tim Johnson and Peter Kennedy*, Gallery A Sydney, 4 November–2 December 1970.
3. Donald Brook, 'Light and space', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 November 1970.
4. *Luminal sequences*, Gallery A Sydney, 20 March–7 April 1971.
5. Terry Smith, 'A therapeutic light show', *The Sunday Australian*, 28 March 1971.
6. *But the fierce Blackman*, Inhibodress, Sydney, 8–28 March 1971.

Above left: Peter Kennedy performing *But the fierce Blackman*, Inhibodress Gallery, Charles Street, Woolloomooloo, Sydney, 8–28 March 1971. Image from Stephen Jones collection. Reproduced courtesy the artist.

Right: Invitation to *Neon light installations*, 1970. Gallery A Sydney archive.

