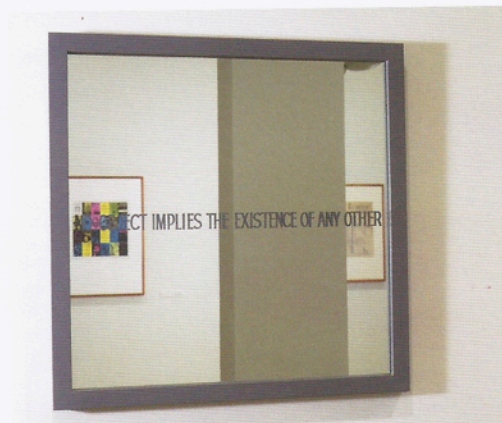


How does an artwork itself interpret its own past? Take the minimal work made by Ian Burn in his first year in New York in 1967. Almost overnight he shifts from stretched canvas to plywood panel, from paint brush to industrial spray, from vertical easel to horizontal plane. The paint used for the identical panels of *Blue Reflex* (1966–67) is a royal blue sourced from Reo trucks, prompted by seeing other New York artists making work with ‘bright automobile lacquers containing metal flake, which are reflective and emphasise the surface.’¹ The American colour is a minimalist reply to Yves Klein’s transcendent IKB (International Klein Blue). Burn’s immaculate reflective surface is achieved by spraying then cutting back and buffing successive layers of paint. Only the thick edge, which exposes layers of plywood, indicates his manual labour. He later confessed, ‘I couldn’t get rid of the feeling that art had to be labour intensive, on some skilled level’.² Like Rauschenberg’s famous *White Paintings* of 1951, his monochrome *Blue Reflex* was not blank or inert, as Burn would observe, because ‘reflections make up the main visual content ... the work retains no fixed appearance’.³

His friend and fellow artist Mel Ramsden, who arrived from London a few months later, moved into a loft on Sixth Avenue more or less opposite Burn. There they began an intense and daily conversation about their confusions and frustrations with abstract painting. At the time Ramsden had been painting blank monochrome canvases which, Burn later recalled, would test the limits of perception by requiring the viewer to shift attention ‘to how something becomes visible ... by moving about until painted edges catch the light ... While we may subsequently resume “seeing” (not-seeing) from our initial vantage-point, we do so with additional knowledge.’⁴

That same year Burn moved from making mirror-like paintings to using ‘invisible’ materials such as glass, acetate and mirrors to explore the gap between the literal and the virtual/illusory. In his mirror works the viewer is cast as the slippery ‘content’ of the work. Among them are certain dysfunctional mirrors, for instance *No object ... Mirror* (1967), with the words ‘no object implies the existence of any other’ across its centre. Though apparently commonplace, this statement is pulled from David Hume’s epistemology: ‘[There is] No object [which] implies the insistence of any other [if we consider these objects in themselves, and never look beyond the ideas which we form of them].’⁵ Looking at such a work opens up a space between what is read and what is seen. In this way Burn’s art turns the conventional, contemplative gaze of the beholder into something more self-reflexive and interpretative.

1. Donald Judd, *7 Sculptors*, John Chamberlain, exh. cat., Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, November 1965 – January 1966, reprinted in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings*, Nova Scotia Press, Halifax, NS, Canada, p. 190.
2. Ian Burn, unpublished talk, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, May 1991.
3. Ian Burn, letter, March 1968, cited in *Ian Burn: Minimal-Conceptual Work 1965–1970*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 1992, p.70.
4. Ian Burn, *Looking at Seeing and Reading*, exh. cat., Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, July 1993, paragraph 17.



OPPOSITE
Ian Burn
Blue Reflex 1966–67

ABOVE
Ian Burn
*No Object Implies The
Existence of Any Other* 1967
synthetic polymer paint on
wood, mirror, lettering
64.5 x 64.5 x 3 cm
Installation view, Museum
of Contemporary Art,
Australia, 1997