

This extract is from an article about Australian art following Lucy Lippard's visit to Australia in 1975. Lippard briefly discussed regionalism, Aboriginal art politics, and 'progressive' artists such as Geoff Hogg, Michael Dolk and Marilyn Fairskye; the Earthworks Collective; Toni Robertson and Chips Mackinolty; Ian Burn, Ian Milliss, and Leslie Pearson; together with extended commentary on Peter Kennedy's *November Eleven*, Vivienne Binns' community arts projects and Ann Newmarch's *History of Australia*.

"Vivienne Binns' 'softer' intervention into Australian history is concentrated in the personal realm. Though both she and [Peter] Kennedy are highly respected in the artworld and involved with the Community Arts Board, she works in the field. She describes herself as a "visual artist who has opted to work for the most part in community situations rather than in isolation in a studio, though I also do that. The contexts, the venues, and the audience vary a great deal." Binns is "primarily interested in breaking down the distinction between the art of artists and art institutions on the one hand and the art expression of people in general on the other." Initially a painter who became involved in vitreous enamelling and developed an industrial photo-silk-screenprinting process in enamel, she is currently responsible as Community Artist for a staggering 60,000 mile territory in west-central New South Wales.

Binns's art is particularly concerned with women's lives. Her preoccupation with Australian history is therefore similar to Kennedy's; the history of women is also invisible, a microcosm in Australia of Australia's invisibility in the world. Her approach to the community attempts to undermine the Australian inferiority complex, as well as to develop simultaneously a sense of self-esteem and artistic skills for untrained people. Her best-known work is a three-year project called *Mothers' Memories/Others' Memories (MMOM)*, executed with 38 suburban women in Blacktown, New South Wales. It began when Binns and a friend had the idea of "swapping mums"—making duty calls on each other's mothers as a way of breaking out of the stereotyped and unsatisfactory mother/daughter relationship. Aware that while children's creativity is temporarily encouraged, adults learn to abandon it in favour of more practical pursuits and to leave art to the professionals, she is trying to re-establish the chain between creativity, expression, power, and art in people's lives. ("If we're unable to express ourselves at all, we're likely to be either dead or catatonic.")

## Out of control: Australian Art on the Left

Voice, October 19, 1982. By Lucy Lippard



Vivienne Binns and participants  
*Mothers' memories, others' memories* 1980  
 photo-screenprint of vitreous enamel on steel, nylon line in  
 commercial postcard rack  
 90.4 x 27.0 x 27.0 cm  
 Collection of National Gallery of Australia, Canberra





Vivienne Binns and friends

*Tower of Babel* 1989

Mixed media

Dimensions variable

An ongoing project that relies on the collaboration and goodwill of many artists. Artists are provided with a wooden box in which to create an artwork in exchange for a work from Vivienne. The boxes are displayed together to form a 'Tower of Babel' structure. The configuration changes from exhibition to exhibition as more boxes are added to the work.

Collection of Vivienne Binns

Photo Brenton McGeachie, *Suburb*, Museum of Sydney, 2000

MMOM centered on a collaborative piece called *Scenes from the Highway of Life*—a rotating towerlike postcard stand with photo-enamelled cards drawn from the experiences of some of the women who participated in the exhibition. It has since been shown in shopping centres and art galleries, locally and abroad.

Binns is a charismatic character, whether bursting into music-hall ditties at the drop of a hat, driving hundreds of miles through the wilderness in her red diesel truck, or enthusiastically sharing a cup of tea with elderly ladies at a "day care" home. I stayed for a few days in her Community Arts Board trailer, parked in a noisy elementary school yard in the country town of Lake Cargelligo. (In Australia the country really means the country; there are only some 50 towns in the 60,000-square-mile area where Binns works.) Watching her in action is in fact watching her in integration. Not too much seems to be going on, since she prefers to work through existing social forms—afternoon teas, sports events, fetes, and other "understood gatherings." This is in addition to her art classes, mural project, crafts work on an Aboriginal reserve, and float-making for a parade with an Aboriginal youth group.





Lucy Lippard and Vivienne on  
Lila and Bert McLain's property,  
Lake Cargelligo, NSW 1981  
Collection of Vivienne Binns

Among the problems she has had to overcome while working into Australian history through people's lives is the sense of privacy around family conflict and touchy questions of sex and politics. The strategies devised by local women to protect themselves and their secrets, however, are precisely those used by professional artists: withdrawal, uncaptioned photographs, concentration on a single experience to exclude more sensitive material, indication of conflict only obliquely or ambiguously. In Lake Cargelligo, we visited women in their farm houses as well as attending scheduled classes and local events. One such visit revealed the heart of Binns's long-term project far better than anything she could say.

Lila is the wife and active partner of a pig-farmer; she is also a painter and craftsperson, local social force, and mother. Looking at some 100 slides she had taken of her family, we learned not only an amazing amount of communal history, but learned it through the eye of an artist. The conventional figures and scenes from Lila's life were framed and envisioned with an unerring formal accuracy that monumentalised a personal into an aesthetic experience.

Binns is battling on two fronts. She is standing up for the individual's right to express herself and she is denying the generally false separation between art and work. In a paper given at the "Arts and Working Life" conference in Sydney in 1981, she talked about her photo-enamel process, about commercial art ["one place where art is integrated with work, when that means a paid job"], and about how the arts are seen as female and work as male. She is looking for a union of the two—"something that will transform the work experience and change the nature of art ... a situation where the creative ability and need for expression are recognised and allowed to operate in the work processes themselves, thus freeing the power of those engaged in work to shape and organize their lives according to their needs and abilities ..."

At the moment, Binns is concocting ways to bring the breadth of shared experience she gets from her community work into the more coherent framework of her own art. Particularly interested in the relationship of lives to the environments in which they are lived, she is developing new work about landscape, community and history.'

*After devoting two decades of her life to political activism and the feminist art movement in New York in the 1960s–1980s, Lucy Lippard now lives in New Mexico writing about cultural geography and working on open space and land issues. Since 1966, Lippard has published 20 books on feminism, art, politics and place and has received numerous awards and accolades from literary critics and art associations. Books include the influential *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, 1976, *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art and Place*, 1999 and *The Pink Glass Swan*, 2005. She has published on artists such as Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois and Judy Chicago.*