

EDUCATION NOTES
INVESTIGATING ARTWORKS IN THE GALLERY
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ART
GALLERY
NSW

40 YEARS
KALDOR PUBLIC
ART PROJECTS

2008
MARTIN
BOYCE



2008 MARTIN BOYCE

PROJECT

We are shipwrecked and landlocked
22 October – 30 November 2008
Old Melbourne Gaol, Melbourne

I'm trying to avoid nostalgia. By and large what you're looking at is something from the past, but I want to bring it into the now and see what effect time has had on that.

Martin Boyce in Moira Jeffrey, 'Martin Boyce interview: pilgrim to a far pavilion', *Scotland on Sunday*, 4 January 2009

MARTIN BOYCE

Detail of **We are shipwrecked and landlocked** 2008 in the courtyard of the Old Melbourne Gaol

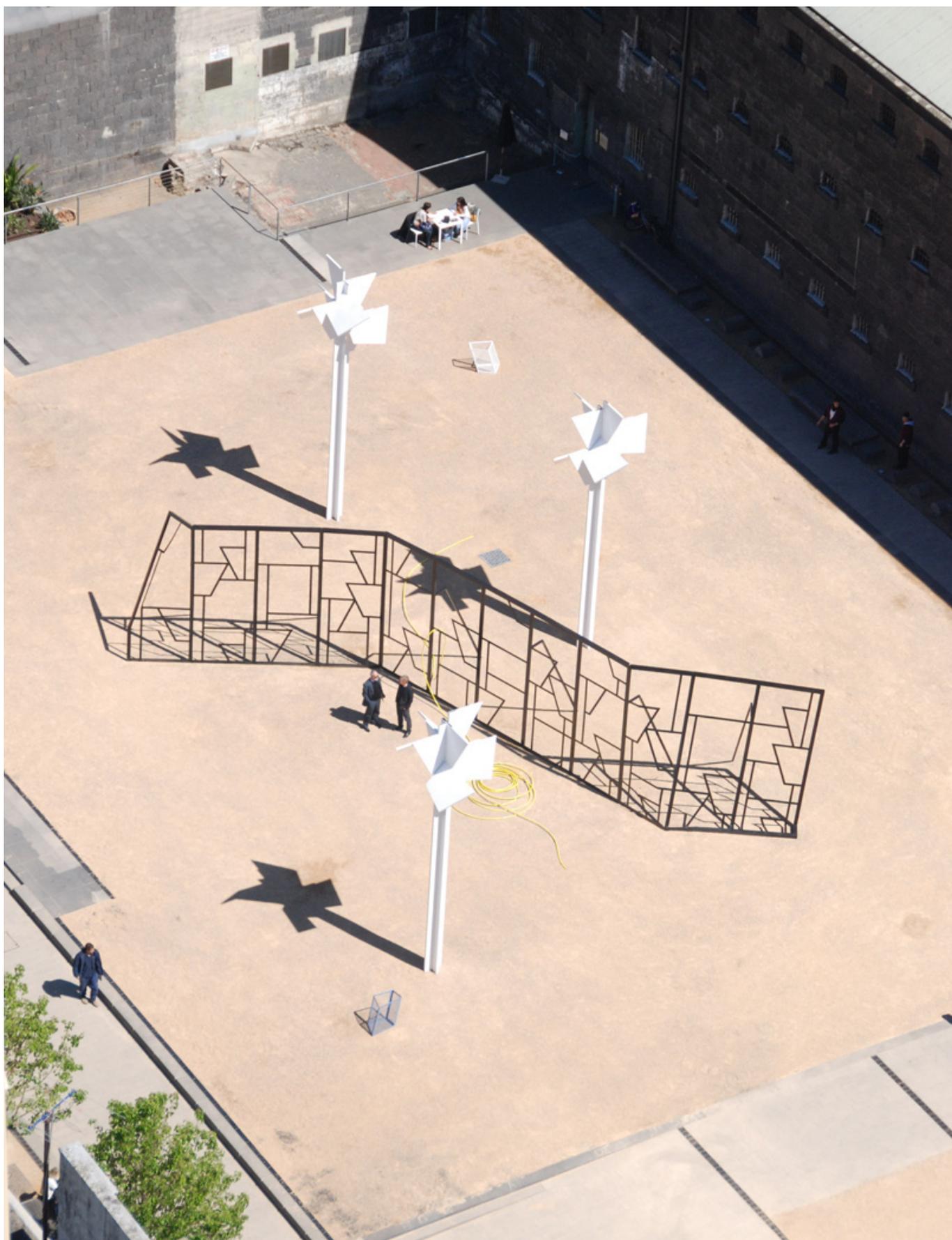
Photo: Adam Free



MARTIN BOYCE

We are shipwrecked and landlocked 2008
in the courtyard of the Old Melbourne Gaol

Photo: Adam Free



2008 MARTIN BOYCE

INTRODUCTION

Out of the weighty modernist tradition of architecture and design, Martin Boyce plays fast and loose, customising new indoor and outdoor installations that beguile our conscious attention with familiar iconography while working on our unconscious sensibility with versions that seem uncomfortably out of kilter. Boyce toys with his own nostalgia for modernism, and then rebuffs it. The city is both a real and a psychological terrain in Boyce's work and he veers inventively between the two, often wrong-footing the viewer as we fail to mind the gap. Fluorescent strip lights, leg splints, tribal masks, chain-link fencing and ventilation grills may be unhinged from their usual functions as a way of exorcising our collective alienation from urban design. In Boyce, even words as simple as 'fence' and 'tree' have to be put into scare quotes. The trees in Boyce's 2008 Kaldor project, for example, were based on abstracted concrete trees made for a 1925 exhibition of decorative arts in Paris. In other words, they were a kind of signifier of a tree, a stylised tree, at one remove from a real tree, whose shapes Boyce then went on to isolate and reassemble. Even the bins and hoses in this work took on the same tree shape. Thus the artist conflates architecture, nature and sculpture and creates a kind of sandpit for the mind.

ARTIST

Martin Boyce

born 1967 in Glasgow, Scotland
lives and works in Glasgow and Berlin, Germany

As a child, Martin Boyce recalls seeing a new housing estate go up in Hamilton, near Glasgow, which his family eventually moved into; it was surrounded by an area known as 'the woods'. It left an impression: the dream of the place and the reality of the place, a bit of Los Angeles in west central Scotland. Encouraged by his art teacher, he applied his graphic skills to drawing album sleeves. He failed, however, in his first attempt to get into the Glasgow School of Art, and so worked for Virgin Records as a day job while attending night school. Eventually, he ended up in the Environmental Art Department, which produced a whole generation of Scottish contemporary artists who emerged in the 1990s, such as filmmaker Douglas Gordon and Iain Kettles, the maker of inflatable sculptures. He later spent a year at Cal Arts in Los Angeles studying for his MA, and spent 18 months in Berlin on a fellowship.

These days, Boyce creates large-scale sculptural installations and environments. An assiduous student of modernist forms, he often quotes, and reuses for his signature purposes, the moulded plywood furniture of Charles and Ray Eames, Saul Bass movie poster graphics, or interior designer Ben Kelly's international hotel interiors of the 1980s. Some pop culture references have filtered through into his work from the music album covers of his youth. His titles are often quirky, like *My*

head is on fire but my heart is full of love and *Word enough to save a life word enough to take a life*, yet his work has had a dark, pressing melancholy quality. In time, he's become more interested in utopias, as places we create for ourselves that may be emotional, imaginary, or so physical you can walk through them.

Boyce often constructs his models and maquettes in his studios in Maryhill, Glasgow and then transfers his sculptural installations to sites around the world.

Exhibiting since 1994, Boyce represented Scotland at the Venice Biennale in 2009 with *No reflection*, filling seven rooms of the 15th-century Palazzo Pisani with outdoor material, fake autumn leaves, polygonal stepping stones, fragmented brass letters, tables and benches, as well as chandeliers replaced by black aluminium. The starting point was the same as for *We are shipwrecked and landlocked*, his 2008 Kaldor project in Australia: a photograph of concrete trees created by Joël and Jan Martel in 1925.

In the same year he made *We are shipwrecked and landlocked*, Boyce took part in *We burn, we shiver*, with another Kaldor artist Ugo Rondinone, at the Sculpture Centre in New York. Boyce placed a half-lit fluorescent fixture on the ceiling made out of the broken geometry of a surgical splint, based on Ray and Charles Eames World War II designs for plywood splints and stretchers for wounded troops. While outdoors, two panels as faint as photographic negatives became an enigmatic notice.

PROJECT

Martin Boyce's 2008 Kaldor project, *We are shipwrecked and landlocked*, takes inspiration from the cubist-style trees created by twin brothers Joël and Jan Martel for the 1925 *Exposition des arts décoratifs* in Paris. 1925 was the year Le Corbusier erected the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, which outraged the authorities and set in motion a debate about modern architecture that continues to this day. The house of the future, Le Corbusier proposed, must be a *machine à habiter*, a 'machine for living', and not a three-dimensional backdrop for interior decorators.

Boyce is drawn to the idea of a landscape that dreams itself into existence and hovers between a real physical place and an imaginary one. For his Kaldor project, the historically layered courtyard of the Old Melbourne Gaol was paved to resemble a desert (or a car park or underpass) and the entire artificial environment looked as if it had been dropped from outer space (hence the title). Beginning with the three palm-tree-like sculptures, the familiar starts to shift from its normal purpose. A fence sits in the middle of the space, rather than at the perimeter, thus functioning more as a semi-abstract sculpture. Rather in the stylised form of the Martel brothers' sculptures, a hose crosses the fence, and a distorted wire-mesh bin sits alongside a drain grille.

The 'new' is a dead myth, a cobbled together invention; history is in process, and is continually being rewritten in these quotations. The 'copy' gives the illusion that there was an 'original' in a pristine historical context waiting to be plundered. By utilising such mythic forms, by quoting and seemingly misappropriating them, to a certain extent, Martin Boyce creates a dialogue with the 'original' work, which is now only a memory ... Boyce intends to 'produce somewhere lost or out of time, a place that exists when no-one is looking. A misplaced place.'

Alexander Kennedy, 'Martin Boyce: sculpture scene', *Map*, www.mapmagazine.co.uk

WORLD EVENTS: 2008

- _ World stockmarkets plunge, fuelled by the US subprime mortgage crisis
- _ Activists in Egypt use Facebook to rally for democracy
- _ Rising food and fuel prices trigger riots in the Third World
- _ Release of *WALL-E*, Pixar's ecologically-minded animation
- _ Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivers a formal apology to the Stolen Generations
- _ MySpace Australia holds its first art competition
- _ Artists resale royalty right scheme introduced in Australia
- _ Police in Sydney confiscate artist Bill Henson's photographs, sparking debate on censorship
- _ Biennale of Sydney, *Revolutions – forms that turn*, artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev
- _ Gift of the John Kaldor Family Collection to the Art Gallery of NSW announced
- _ 17th Kaldor project: Two works – *Fire Woman* and *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)* – from Bill Viola's *The Tristan Project* installed at St Saviour's Church in the Sydney suburb of Redfern
- _ 18th Kaldor project: Martin Boyce creates the installation *We are shipwrecked and landlocked* in the grounds of Old Melbourne Gaol

THEME

Installation art

There is a psychological, even moral, quality to inhabited space that philosopher Gaston Bachelard detailed so eloquently in his book, *The poetics of space*. The space we inhabit is never geometric, but oneiric (related to dreams). Space, he wrote, is compressed time. Think of the daydream-soaked house of childhood; the heady intellectual space of the attic; or the basement into whose subconscious levels we descend with a metaphorical candle, even in the age of electricity. They each conjure a super-sensory, even sub-sensory, dimension: centres of boredom or reverie or silent beholding.

In 1976, Brian O'Doherty wrote three articles in the journal *Artforum* that later became the book *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space*. O'Doherty was looking at the modern gallery and what a very controlled context it is. Its whiteness bleaches out the past, giving the artwork a sense of being out of time, beyond time. This kind of eternity of display became so overbearing, we now tend to see the space first. According to O'Doherty, the modern museum space derives its sepulchral force from painted caves, Egyptian tomb chambers and medieval churches. The secular modern gallery has lost some power, but it still has a sanctity that mixes the formality of the courtroom and the mystique of the experimental lab.

Decades earlier, in the 1920s and '30s, Russian constructivist Vladimir Tatlin had broken away from the ideal sculptural space on the pedestal, as traditionally offered by a gallery. Working from his sailor's knowledge of physical things, he set up his sculptural works, like his 1917 *Corner relief*, made from vernacular materials, in the angles between the walls themselves. This shift to the use of real materials in real space – interior corridors, ceilings, walls or floors, or even outdoor sites – announced the emergence of installation art.

Installation transforms the foursquare, stable cube designed by architects into an existential or actualised space produced by a reader or viewer. It also dismantles the tidy groups of spatial experiences we associate with museums – those neat rows of eye-level art – by forcing us to enter other spaces and take in other information.

Installations vary enormously: they can be small and intimate, or massive and theatrical, while each artist's efforts in this area are as intimate and revealing as handwriting. Photography, video, painting, sculpture, all the mediums of installation, shed their autonomy; the object itself is not the work but the system of relationships. All the tangled arteries of 20th-century art seem to lead to installation.

Installation art releases ways of thinking and feeling that have previously been marginalised by the pictorial and illusionistic orders of space. It can tap into the empowering forces of indigenous cultures, or make us aware of crippling forms of absent power (like dharma), while at the same time plugging into current metaphors of techno-immersion (like ambient music or omnidirectional acoustic space, interactivity, virtual reality). Installation is art finding new ways to go on despite frightening historical discontinuities.

Examples of other influential installation artists include Joseph Beuys, Louise Bourgeois, Daniel Buren, Christian Boltanski and Giuseppe Penone. Among the Kaldor project artists, Ugo Rondinone, Gregor Schneider, Martin Boyce, Tatzu Nishi, Richard Long, Barry McGee and Miralda all fit under the umbrella of installation art.

COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection

- **Stephen Bram** (Australia, b1961)

Untitled (two point perspective) 1988

oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas; 38 x 28 cm
Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 2005 262.2005

When Bram combined representational and abstract elements in this work, he engineered a clash between two very different perceptual systems. Bram's spatial matrix evokes both the confident certainties of the modernist environment but also, as the foundational geometry of the perspective grid fragments and disintegrates, the postmodern ambiguities of the present day.

- **Carole Roberts** (Australia, b1958)

Wooden periodics 1990

stained mahogany wall assemblage; 317 x 470 x 57 cm
Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 1992 32.1992.a-hh

Roberts' interest in architecture extended to design and in a postmodern spirit to décor. *Wooden periodics* is at once a formal painting and a flat relief sculpture, a hat rack and a forest, minimalist and figurative, the ambiguity evoking the relationship between architecture and nature.

- **Tony Clark** (Australia, b1954)

Jasperware painting (pink) 1995

6 panels, synthetic polymer paint on canvas; 244 x 1098 x 2 cm overall
Moët & Chandon Art Acquisition Fund 1996 213.1996.a-f

Clark's love of the 'recherché' – often marginal genres that have dropped out of art history – acts to subvert the normative ideas we have about modernism, formalism and representation. His 1993 Jasperware paintings, for example, put together the pop principle of early industrial design, classical references to Greek architectural friezes and a conceptual ambition to turn painting into anti-painting.

SELECTED REFERENCES

- _ Michael Archer, 'Martin Boyce', *Art Monthly*, no 185, Apr 1995, pp 34–35
- _ Jacob Fabricius, 'Martin Boyce', *Flash Art*, May–June 2003, p 144
- _ Sophie Forbat (ed), *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney 2009
- _ Barbara Hess, 'Martin Boyce', *Flash Art*, Jan–Feb 2001, p 120
- _ Axel Lapp, 'Martin Boyce', *Art Review*, Jan 2007, p 153
- _ Lars Bang Larsen, 'Martin Boyce', *Artforum*, summer 2003
- _ Catrin Lorch et al, *Martin Boyce*, JRP|Ringier, Kunstverlag 2009
- _ Herbert Martin, 'Martin Boyce', *Artforum*, May 2007, p 196

Websites

- _ Kaldor Public Art Projects
www.kaldorartprojects.org.au
- _ Kaldor Public Art Projects Explorer, Art Gallery of NSW
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects
- _ Martin Boyce, Galerie Eva Presenhuber
www.presenhuber.com/en/artists/BOYCE_MARTIN/works/overview.html
- _ Martin Boyce interview, Submit Response
www.btinternet.com/~jack.mottram/test/boyce.html

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

As a child, Boyce seemed acutely aware of his physical and geographic surrounds. Think back to your own childhood and identify the things that occupied your consciousness. Are they still part of your identity? Explain the expression 'sandpit for the mind' in reference to Boyce's approach to art-making. Outline elements of playfulness and naivety evident in his works.

Suburban environments become dreamy and mystical through Boyce's approach. Investigate other artists who have explored the suburban within their work. Assess how these artists, including Boyce, move beyond mere representation of these environments to evoke a sense of the emotional and psychological experience. Define how they have manipulated the formal qualities and materials of their work to achieve this. Account for the position both Boyce and these other artists have taken on their subject matter. Discuss whether Boyce generates a 'psychological terrain' with which his audience can engage.

Outline the use of geometric, formal, ordered and cubist elements in Boyce's Kaldor project. Suggest how architecture and objects become one in Boyce's distinctive composition. Compare these design features with those of other artists such as Stephen Bram and Carole Roberts. What issues and ideas do they cast on renditions of 'everydayness'? Imagine your local streets, parks and home altered by Boyce's signature design approach. Discuss the possible affects of these alterations on these environments, their use and people's sense of place within them.

Write a list of words that conjure up imagery relating to forest and garden environments. Locate artists who express connections with these environments. Enhance your list based on responses to these works. Evaluate the differences between the words that describe 'real' spaces you have moved within and those represented in the artworks you have viewed. Discuss the words 'gap', 'veers...between the two' and 'hovers' and the ideas they conjure. Propose what those same words suggest when associated with Boyce's practice. Debate whether this indicates any indecision or ambivalence on Boyce's behalf.

Research definitions and meanings of modernism and post-modernism. List the defining characteristics of each term within the art world. Locate artists who could be categorised with each. Assess Boyce's Kaldor project in the same way. Investigate if there is evidence of modernist influences adapted into or referenced in his project. Debate whether the term postmodern is relevant to contemporary practice. If it is, does it apply to Boyce?

Discuss the relationship of the Old Melbourne Gaol site to *We are shipwrecked and landlocked*. Investigate the site-specific nature of installation art and how the space or site is often specifically chosen and incorporated in the conceptual and physical nature of the artwork. Does Boyce's choice of site deliberately take the audience into 'no man's land' or 'up the proverbial garden path'? In your opinion, could or should Boyce's work be installed at other sites? Debate how this changes the artwork and its experience for the viewer. Is it still the same artwork?

Locate information about the trees created by Joël and Jan Martel in Paris in 1925 that inspired elements of *We are shipwrecked and landlocked*. Research other artworks in art history and the inspiration for their development. Discuss the sources of artists' inspiration and influence. Are they always visual references? Can you identify aspects of the Martel's work within Boyce's? Judge how terms such as new, copy, original, appropriation and adaptation apply to Boyce's philosophy and work. Step through the process and plans you think Boyce may implement to create his works, from conception to production, and indicate the time that might be required for each step.

While Boyce incorporates influences from outside his world into his work, assess to what degree his personal history and memories filter in. Consider how the title of an artwork might assist the audience in interpreting the work. Discuss how some artists try and confound this impulse for meaning and interpretation and the strategies they use. Investigate any relevance of the title for Boyce's Kaldor project to the work's original inspiration. Develop a scenario then write some prose with the first line being 'We are shipwrecked and landlocked'. Explain how Boyce's work has stimulated it.

Compare Boyce's choice of materials for *We are shipwrecked and landlocked* with those that Gregor Schneider used for his Kaldor project. Create an inventory, noting the differences in the selection of materials. Discuss how materials can be utilised for their symbolic qualities as well as their physical properties. Examine this idea in relation to Schneider and Boyce and how this contributes to their work being more resolved.

Does Boyce's material choice correlate to the scale of his works? Do his works lack detail or are they forms rich in innuendo? Examine how artists can play with familiar objects/subjects, through relief and perspective. Which design principles does Boyce use to arrange and suspend the components within the chosen space? Note any visual or psychological boundaries indicating where the works start and stop. Discuss whether the same factors apply to his exterior and interior installations.

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Design Analiese Cairis, Zoe Cooper
Editor Kirsten Tilgals

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Photo: Adam Free

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Art Gallery of NSW
Art Gallery Road, The Domain
Sydney 2000 Australia
pp@nsw.gov.au

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