WE'RE A WEIRD MOB: DESIGNING A CULTURAL IDENTITY– *The projects of All Australian Graffiti (1975-78) and a Vision Unfurled.* **11 June – 9 October 2005, Post Master Gallery, National Philatelic Collection, Melbourne. Curator: Elizabeth Gertsakis.**

WOGS, SKIPS AND ICONS: DESIGNING A CULTURAL IDENTITY– ALL AUSTRALIAN GRAFFITI, A VISION UNFURLED: DESIGN AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY.

"Australia continues to see itself as a place of the future still in the making, as a civilisation that is always arriving but which has not yet quite arrived. We are a community of perpetual provisionality. We have come together out of fragments, out of bits and pieces from here and there, out of crosses and double crosses, out of colonialism and modernity." Richard Nile, "Civilisation", *The Australian Legend and its Discontents*

The focus of this exhibition is the role of the graphic image and icon in the construction of cultural identity – that is in shaping the popular imagination of who we are and aspire to be as Australians. As the opening ceremony of the 2000 Olympics illustrated popular culture imagery is important to the way we publicly shape and negotiate our discourse of identity. In Australia, a migrant/settler nation with an Indigenous population, national identity is constantly being contested as different groups grow and seek to have their voices and identities heard. This exhibition's focus is the role of graphic design in constructing the public discourse of national identity, by linking together the work of the 1970s design studio *All Australian Graffiti (AAG)*, and the contemporary design of *A Vision Unfurled*.

In AAG we encounter the power of the migrant voice to inject new dimensions and nuances into the complex tapestry of Australian symbolic language through the use of popular culture. In *A Vision Unfurled* we find the ongoing search for a unifying symbol that will weave together all facets of our Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities in the form of a new Australian flag.

All Australian Graffiti was unusual and significant for several reasons. Firstly as a commercial design studio which, during its lifespan (1971- 1978), set out to invent/re-invent a symbolic, visual language that spoke of an all new Australian identity. The "new" here referring to the postwar migrant who, commonly referred to as the "New Australian", was the new bloke on the block. Founded by Con Aslanis (Greek) and Mimmo Cozzolino (Italian) AAG was unique for its migrant politics and nationalist stance within both the design industry and the wider society. Searching for what it meant to be Greek/Australian or Italian/Australian, they set out to develop a hybrid graphic language that would somehow celebrate what it meant to be an Australian while holding to their cultural heritage. They captured this and the character of their design with their trademark, Kevin Pappas.

Half Greek, half kangaroo, Kevin was a peculiarly Australian phenomenon inspired, as his inventor Aslanis explains, by the experience of the Greek who, "has been in Australia for twenty years and [when he] returns to the old country, his accent is so broad, and his tastes so different, the locals have a slang name for him– a kangaroo Greek." In Kevin Pappas, the vernacular wog and skip are combined into an affectionate symbol of the cultural fragmentation and hybridity that informs the Australian experience.

In the manner of multi-culturalism, AAG expanded to include a mix of nationalities including Anglo-Saxon Australians who all shared the studio's vision of a new identity that was egalitarian and anti-

elitist. With playful irreverence they invented, appropriated and reworked icons and images especially those celebrating the "dagginess" and ordinariness of Australia; the suburb, the house, the backyard, the meat pie, the Holden car, the kangaroo, the Eureka flag and so on. Their ironic stance on what was the quintessential Australian was not unlike Barry Humphries' take on the Anglo-Saxon Melbourne eastern suburbs. But AAG's focus was on popular culture and the graphic image as they spotlighted cultural prejudices by representing migrant culture as the wog calling the bigot's bluff. This is most evident in the *Kevin Pappas Tear Out Postcard Book*, which is challenging with its celebration of over the top bad taste in a manner that predicts today's *Kath and Kim*.

In design terms the AAG's nationalist agenda was a reaction to the time, to the spread of internationalism and modernist design and the aggressive dominance of the Australian market by American advertising agencies. They rejected design sophistication, developing instead a brash affection for the popular and for the traditions of Australian larrikin humour as evidenced in the ephemeral world of commercial art: in postcards, comics, cartoons, labels, trademarks, the advertisement illustrations and texts, posters and so on. This interest in the rich history of commercial imagery and especially the trademark, led to Mimmo Cozzolino's *Symbols of Australia*, arguably one of the most significant publications about Australian graphic design history. A visual history of the Made in Australia trademark, *Symbols of Australia*, drew attention to the importance of commerce and popular culture rather than high art in building our cultural iconography. In the history of the trademark we can see the evolution of a distinctive set of icons and themes, and can trace the politics of identity as, for example, in the frequent use of the Aboriginal together with flora and fauna as symbols of distinctiveness and difference.

Well circulated throughout the mass media, AAG's commercial work and publications stand securely as a moment of design activism, of critical regionalism grounded in a pride in being New Australian. As Mimmo Cozzolino explains:

"The early 70s were a time for a freeing up of Australian thinking: the beginning of formalised multi-culturalism, three years of Whitlam. It was probably just the right time when there was a loosening up of how we thought about ourselves as a nation and people seemed to like the way we played with it. Creative people seemed to be at ease with that and liked the fact that they could have a bit of a laugh at it.

"When I was studying graphic design in the late 1960s there was no discussion about the relevance of Australian imagery as a design source. Nor was there anything about the history of Australian design. Instead I knew more about what was going on in New York and Los Angeles. A much more interesting influence at College was a fellow student, Con Aslanis, a Greek and a migrant like me."

Andrew Budge, "All Australian Graffiti: Critical Regionalism in Graphic Design", D. Whitehouse (ed.) National School of Design, Swinburne University, Research Bulletin, no 1. 2000.

"Con has… a great eye for the quintessential Australian suburban landscape and its inhabitants… It was a time to be proud of being an Australian, especially if you were a New Australian. As we were about to start a design studio, we would be able to capitalise on a fresh marketing edge which no one else had: Australian graphics." Mimmo Cozzolino, "Papa, when I grow up I'ma goinga to be an

Australiano!", A. Shiell & A. Stephen (eds.) *The Lie of the Land*, National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University, 1992.

The achievements of AAG clearly illustrate how cultural identity is always being contested, always in a state of change and adaptation and that these changes are made visual and concrete through graphic design, that is through our shared, popular visual language. AAG was not a one-off phenomenon, rather as it drew on history so it sowed the seeds for the future acting as the precursor of today's migrant comedians such as *Effie* and *Wogs Out of Work* and of films such as *The Castle*. Echoes of AAG's humour, themes and graphic illustrative style are also evident in contemporary design groups such as *Mambo*.

The AAG section of this exhibition raises questions about who and how cultural identity is constructed in the popular arena. Do historians, writers and politicians construct it? Or are our cultural icons and symbols constructed by all of us in the public arena, as we choose to respond, rejecting or taking up that which somehow is right for the moment, as for example the boxing kangaroo flag, Vegemite and rubber thongs? It also raises the importance of a graphic language in developing a shared pride in being Australian. Russell Kennedy's flag and ensign extends these issues into the contemporary arena by proposing a new design that celebrates our distinctive visual heritage while reconciling the multicultural diversity of Australian society.

A Vision Unfurled looks at the history of the Australian flag whereby today we have several flags (Australian Flag, Reconciliation Flag, Aboriginal Flag) that in speaking separately for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia re-enforce the deep cultural politics that intermittently trouble our society. With the flag as the ultimate symbol of nation, Kennedy's thesis is that the current flag is problematic. Again if we can think of the 2000 Olympics: the sensitivity of the flag within our cultural discourse was made clear when Cathy Freeman and the nation faced the issue of cultural fragmentation in the question of which flag should she carry, the Australian Flag or the Aboriginal Flag?

Kennedy's proposal is for a new flag program that blends Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia visually and symbolically, rejecting in the process an older symbolism that makes our current flag both difficult and visually undistinctive. The kangaroo *(skip)* which AAG used as a symbol of integration, and which is central to Indigenous and non Indigenous discourses of cultural identity, becomes the unifying icon together with a new set of colours. Instantly recognisable as Australian, this flag has the potential to present a positive and distinctive image internationally and nationally. Open to multiple applications by different interest groups, it is a flag that speaks of the power of the rich diversity and questioning that constitutes Australian culture.

Dr Denise Whitehouse, Senior Lecturer, Design and Cultural History,

Faculty of Design, Swinburne University. June 2005