

ALL AUSTRALIAN GRAFFITI: critical regionalism in graphic design

by Andrew Budge, (Honors Thesis, National School of Design, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia, 1998)¹

All Australian Graffiti was a studio with two lives. The first life began in 1971 when Mimmo Cozzolino, Con Aslanis and Heather Cox, three recent graduates of the Prahran College of Advanced Education's Art and Design School, decided to continue a working relationship they had developed during their college years and founded All Australian Graphics. The studio ceased operation in 1973 when they all left Australia to travel in Europe and Asia. Upon their return in 1975 Cozzolino and Aslanis resolved to revive the studio as All Australian Graffiti with the help of Izi Marmur and Geoff Cook, also Prahran College graduates. The studio played a significant part in the exploration and articulation of Australian identity that took place during in the 1970s. This essay is based on a series of interviews with the principals of All Australian Graffiti undertaken over a four month period in 1998. By editing the interviews into a loosely chronological structure I have attempted to let the principals tell the story of the studio themselves, endeavouring to remain true to the spirit of the interviews if not to the letter. If I have taken any commentary out of context I apologise in advance. I must also extend my apologies to Neil Curtis and Meg Williams both of whom I was unable to interview. Their omission from this process is in no way intended to reflect their importance to the studio.

THE IDEA

Mimmo Cozzolino: I think that to make the three to six month journey to Australia requires a certain kind of attitude. Requires someone who's a little bit more adventurous, which is perhaps the story of all migrants. As much as they are peasants, there's still some spark of wanting to do better. Wanting to achieve, wanting to see the world, wanting to better yourself. And that leads to much more creativity, much less concern for rules and tradition. The isolation itself distances you from tradition.

Izi Marmur: Mimmo, Con and I didn't come here as children. I came here when I was twelve, Mimmo came here when he was twelve or around that age. So we already had a pretty solid idea of what European was. When we came here all of us were absolutely stunned by the beauty of the place ... and the light.

Con Aslanis: While I was still in Greece I'd seen a photograph of Australia in my school geography book. It was of Hans Heysen gumtrees, the dust and sheep. I think what used to happen was the Australian information department in the '50s would say, 'Use this photo, it looks like Australia,' and the Greeks would take it and print it in their books. Everybody used those photos. So I came here to Melbourne, one of the world's most heavily suburbanised cities, and was expecting sheep, dust and Chevrolets. But something was different, I couldn't quite get it and that's probably the beginning of how Graffiti came out.

¹ Ed: A version of this essay was later published in *Crossroads, the NSDResearch Bulletin*, V 1, June 2000.

ca: We were picking on ordinary things. We were looking at Australiana. We said: don't hate the kangaroo, it's the only thing you've got which is wacko. Australia is a really wacky place ... We were looking into those symbols and being outsiders, me being a Greek, I could actually see, Australia is the most surreal place there is.

mc: By 1974 I'd only been in Australia for thirteen years and I was still trying to fit in, but I had no idea that that was what was happening because I denied all my Italianness, notwithstanding the fact that we were playing it up with All Australian Graffiti. A lot of the design work that was being done at the time was quite derivative, even the work that was considered to be some of the best around. It was very pretty, but at the end of the day it probably left us all a bit cold. But I certainly didn't have the sense of trying to beat that stuff. We just went off on our own tangent.

im: I worked for a short time in England for GWP as a visualiser and in Jerusalem as an art director, dealing with a lot of government departments. It was extremely conservative, not open to anything new or exciting. It was like, 'Oh my God, don't stir anything'. Australia was the same to a degree, but Australia still had that, and it's a terrible word, but, pioneering spirit. Put-it-up-you, stir-things-up-a-bit, that sort of thing. That's what excited us about this place. You could laugh at yourself. You wouldn't dare laugh at yourself in England. But we laughed at ourselves and our culture, which was a culture of the Greeks and Italians, the Jews and the Poles, the Australians and the Aborigines. You've got to laugh at it and treat it for what it is and try to extract from it something that is uniquely ours, because no-one can claim ownership on this place really. It's a combination of everybody and design has to reflect that, otherwise we have no uniqueness about us. So that was the idea.

im: When I came back from overseas in 1973, there was a lot more Italian restaurants, Greek restaurants, Chinese restaurants. The festival was just beginning in Lygon Street. A lot of migrant influence was showing dramatically, it was multi-cultural. You had Greek people eating in Italian restaurants. You had Australians going out with Indians. They would all go down to St. Kilda beach and listen to sitars. Those were the times, the post-hippy thing. Where we didn't see any cross-pollination between cultures, was in graphics. So we said to ourselves, okay, you look at your logos and everything is basically in the era of the Bauhaus. All very straight, very clean and very nice but it didn't represent where we are, it doesn't relate to what this country is about. So we tried very hard to bring this into what we were doing. We also tried to build up some pride in the Australian way of life, not making fun of the Aussie thing, but putting it forward.

ca: When Mimmo and I came back from Europe in 1975 and set up Graffiti with Geoff and Izi, we were pissed off. The sixties were dying. Some of the heroes of the sixties were dying and yet there were still stars and stripes. The Aussies were still wearing stars and stripes. We were just sick and tired of it and at the same time there was the Vietnam war and so we really hated the Yanks, we really hated the bastards.

im: Australia still has an anglophile or europhile element in its culture, with none of us really believing that we belong here. Kids these days want to get away from here as

quickly as possible. None of us did. We'd been there, we came here and were making our home here and we wanted to make it the way we believed it should be.

im: There are great influences in this country for design and nobody was doing anything about it. Logos had to be Germanic, TV commercials had to be English and to a great degree illustrations, design and layout had to be American. It was like, 'I want a Milton Glaser poster with a Berlin graphics logo.' And we hated that.

Tony Ward: The basic premise of Graffiti was a position taken to oppose the slickness of Internationalism, which was the them in the them and us battle back then.

ca: There were designers out there but they were the cool Swiss type, like Ken Cato. He was very fine, slick and safe, but if a client wanted something whackier, different, we were nutty enough to have a go at something and laugh at something and that was the spirit of Australia at that time.

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ca: 'We like those human things, those affectionate things. What we do is already antique. Our identity is fast disappearing. The Eureka flag deserved a postcard. So does Melba, even if she didn't carry a rifle at Gallipoli. The meat pie in Australia is as important in terms of national identity as the Concorde is to Europe. We haven't got the Parthenon, but we've got the brick veneer house. It's a monument.'

tw: There was a whole lot of made here about Con and Mimmo's personal culture that just rolled over into being non-international ... Mimmo had always collected trademarks and symbols from when I taught him at Prahran College.

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Mimmo bored and disgusted by the trend in symbol design to slick, glossy sterile stuff, took his camera and tripod to the Patents and Trademarks Office. 'They have records back there to 1906. I took one look at these and said, stuff modern symbols. No-one's made use of this wonderful material: it's much more subtle than kangaroos and koalas.' He unearthed thousands of forgotten trademarks.

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'Look at this,' says Mimmo pointing to a drawing of a hammer smashing an alarm clock, with the insignia, NOTIX. 'It's a brand of *pest-killer*. Imagine—some poor wacka on a farm at Wagga Wagga wakes up one morning with that pun in his head—I love that stuff, that tenuous play on words. It's got such a human element.'

ca: Kevin Pappas, our half Greek/half kangaroo mascot was my invention. I said, 'This studio's not going to have a symbol.' I wanted a Mickey Mouse-like character. Kevin Pappas was a send up, even by name, Kevin. I mean, originally he should have been Con Pappas, but that's like saying John Smith.

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Kevin Pappas is a fictitious example of a peculiarly Australian phenomenon: 'When a Greek has been in Australia for twenty years and 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.'

tw: To me, that which is essentially Australian vernacular has a lot to do with making do with what we have. It has nothing to do with an aesthetic. It's like sandals made from rubber tyres becoming a very desirable fashion statement, plastic sandals from China, the Kangaroo pepper and salt shakers made in Japan. We chose those things that represented the end of the earth, urban Australia. We weren't particularly interested in where it was made.

tw: I would have thought one of the hallmarks of a colonial culture, like Australia's, is that it imports everything. There's nothing here, 200 years is not a very long time, and the trademarks and symbols that Mimmo collected were building on a hundred years of culture and most of that was pretty primitive culture. So everything's imported and part of our cringe in this country is when can we get past this. But it's naive to think that you are ever past it. Internationalism is either made in America, or made in England, or made in Europe, or made somewhere else. Australia is still an importer of Internationalism.

tw: It would have been the early to mid 19th century that people started to include elements of local interest into things. They didn't actually say, 'I'm making this Australian', it was a matter of expressing the differential between a government document made here versus a government document made there. So what do they grab? They grab the same things the silversmiths or the other people grab which was the prevalence of bush, the wattle, the ferns.

tw: We collectively had absolutely no interest in wattle, ferns and kangaroos in their normal, natural sense. It was a totally urban view of Australia.

Geoff Cook: As far as I know, before All Australian Graffiti, design was European influenced. The only Australian design and illustration was following on from the May Gibbs kind of stuff. Gum nuts and gum trees and all that. The Australian rural myth.

tw: In fact it was very hard to own the bush vernacular and the high aesthetic that's evolved from there. The bush vernacular had largely been about a rude austerity which none of us was particularly interested in. Graffiti, isolated elements of the Australian vernacular, other people made them icons. I think we were disgusted by the iconicising of the vernacular, and I still am. I'm depressed by it. As a piece of vernacular the rotary clothes hoist was fine, but as an icon it's awful. It's dishonest. There's an industry out there, Peter Luck leads it, or people like him lead it, there's money in tea-towels.

THE BUSINESS

mc: The primary focus was to get work. We were first and foremost trying to survive in a commercial environment and one of the tenets of marketing is to try and set yourself up as being as different as you possibly can. If in the process you create something that's not fake, that's got a genuine belief in the difference, then you achieve even more success.

gc: There was a conscious thing in the studio that we were following the Australiana line. Before it became a real cliché it was a bit different, the way we did it. Apart from that I think it was just the cross fertilisation of individual personalities, individual skills, but it came together. Mimmo was very important to that Australiana theme and Con too. Mimmo would be the direction and Con had the actual ideas down on paper.

mc: I don't think there was a conscious effort to draw things in an Australian way. I mean Geoff Cook did what Geoff Cook did before he joined All Australian Graffiti. He had some terrific pieces in his folio when he was at school and I saw the potential of those and we just mounted them up and put them in a folio. They'd never been published, but we didn't tell people that.

mc: In 1975 Izi and Geoff joined us and they were looking for a change, having gotten disillusioned working for other people. We set up the studio again along more formal lines, but still building on what we had done before.

tw: The original four were Mimmo, Con, Geoff and Izi and they were all peers at the Prahran College of Art.

gc: As far as I was concerned I was a real beginner, I'd never done illustration as a commercial job before. I had drawing skills but no style and I really learnt from job to job.

tw: I wasn't an illustrator before I joined Graffiti. None of us were in reality. We were all wannabes. I tended to find technique as I went along. I did Norman Rockwell one week and I'd do primitive this or that the next week. I was doing impressions in a sense.

im: At the time we started All Australian Graffiti we were mainly catering for agency work. We didn't really do any direct work. We were what was called a design illustration group. Most of the guys, except for Mimmo and myself, were illustrators. Mimmo's role was mainly in the selling and marketing area. My role was more in design and artwork. So that's how we split things up. What used to happen was that Mimmo would go and pick up the job and come back and we would have a briefing session and we would discuss it as a group. We would discuss everything together. The roles were not strictly defined. We had countless arguments about things.

tw: We didn't sit down and form strategies about how we could change the way people think. But we did believe that the illustrator owned the message as much as the writer. We weren't called in to simply fill a hole in an ad with an illustration. The voice was ours. We went for the conceptual ownership of projects.

im: We all love to produce lovely work, but at the end of the day we are employed by our clients to sell a product, or to communicate whatever they want us to communicate. In the beginning at Graffiti the attitude was, 'Well fuck them. We know what we're doing. We're designers, we're illustrators, we're terrific and we're the best.'

ca: In the mid-70s in St Kilda Road, there weren't too many people around who called themselves a group of wacky illustrators. We didn't make much money. We had fun. We had a sunrise ahead of us and that was very important.

ca: Phillip Adams was one of those rare fellows who opened the door for us and understood our work. In fact we converted him and he doesn't want to admit it, but he started seeing the Australiana. Nobody else was doing it. In early '75 we started the studio with Geoffrey and Izi, and, bang, we had this marketing thing, 'Hey wake up. This is Australiana.'

mc: The early 70s were a time of 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. Whether they were laughing at us or with us, I'm not sure, but it was just so different from what everyone else was doing.

gc: I wasn't so much into the Australiana and all of us did work that wasn't in that vein. We weren't travelling in a straight line. It was the Australiana that got us known, but my work ranged from the bread and butter stuff, mundane illustration work, to things like the hotdog card, and that's Australiana. But the most well known things I've done, the 'Cricket' poster and the 'Tennis' poster aren't really in that line.

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The posters and the 'Kevin Pappas Tear-out Postcard Book' are only a tiny part of All Australian Graffiti's work: 90 per cent of their time is spent on bread and butter work for advertising agencies. They manifest different degrees of resignation to this fact.

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ca: 'Each of us has a personal morality. But we can't afford to be too scrupulous because then we wouldn't get work. You get black-banned as fast as a wink if you show any conscience at all. Conscience takes the bottom drawer. Personally, I don't do ads for heavy drugs.'

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mc: 'We've knocked back Liberal Party work. We're all ALP voters, it would be silly to do their stuff. There's no clean advertising, though. If you're in advertising, that's it. You can't only work on nice things. If we say no too many times, they won't ring again.'

im: In the beginning we were servicing smaller boutique agencies, the multi-nationals wouldn't have a bar of us at all. Agencies that were very small at that time like Kutt, Skinner, Bennett would talk to us and MDA would talk to us. People like Clemengers wouldn't. So we started out on the bottom rung and even those little ones that had a little vision were very, very sceptical and careful. Art directors got excited because it's an art director's job to get excited, but the creative director would say, 'wait a minute, how am I going to sell this to the client?' So we did start at the low end and after a while, before we closed down, before we all parted company, we were servicing clients like George Patt's, USP Needham, Clemengers, Grey, Masius, all those places. Because unfortunately nobody wants to do something unless somebody else has tried it first.

ca: We were aware that we were pretty good. People saw these young fellas bringing something fresh. Advertising is like that. They'll jump on you, 'Let's use these lads.'

mc: I was never quite sure how people viewed us. I suspect people just didn't know how to react to a lot of our work. Especially our self promotion work.

im: It was a shock to a lot of people, an absolute shock.

mc: Our business card was about as far way from high design as you can get. But I guess in the same way that a lot of our contemporaries were probably taking off Glaser and so on, Con was really influenced by the people like Crumb, the card is pure Crumb ... and Crumb was really big.

mc: If you saw business cards from people like Gary Emery and Cato at the time, they were very white on white. So if you bring out a card like ours, it just looks like a Greek wedding invitation and people really didn't really know how to react to it. I remember there was a lot of uneasiness, more with designers than with advertisers. The advertisers could see the joke in it they could see the flipness, the flipside.

im: The first person to shock us into the realisation that our work seemed to be influencing people was John Singleton. He came up with all the Aussie jingles not too long after we started doing what we were doing. Even the graphics he started using, the kangaroos and things like that. There was nothing like that before, nobody would dare use a kangaroo in a logo. The only time you would see a kangaroo was in a children's book or a soft-toy or something touristy, but nobody would have used it in an annual report.

gc: I can't say that we had any lasting influence. I think if there was any influence it would have been very subtle. There might have even been other illustrators around that were doing something similar but I didn't know any illustrators at that time and I think if there were they would have been one individual whereas we were a whole group producing work under one name and that would have helped us become more noticed.

gc: We were never flooded with work and there were times when it was pretty scarce. It was never a money making venture. No matter who did what and what amount of work you did, the proceeds were divvied up equally between everybody. Like a commune sort of arrangement. We never really got much more than a basic wage. We certainly had our quiet times when one, two, three, four of us were sitting around with nothing to do. So financially it wasn't fantastic, but for work satisfaction and for what we did, for the body of work we produced in that time it was certainly worthwhile.

tw: We had to feed six people at least, eight people. It was a bit hard. It was a co-operative essentially, which in commerce doesn't always work. Especially when the income is being largely generated by half or two thirds of the people. It starts to create fractures.

tw: The theory of what Graffiti should be, became a dominant subject and I think it just overwhelmed the spirit of the place.

gc: I wasn't in Melbourne when the studio broke up. I went to move up to Sydney in 1977. It wasn't that I wanted to get away from Graffiti, I just wanted a change of scene myself. So I moved up and I was the Sydney office of All Australian Graffiti. Mimmo came up with me initially and we both did the rounds to start generating some work up there. I was working flat out, being the only Graffiti guy in Sydney and I found out later that the guys were very quiet down in Melbourne. So I think I was more or less keeping the studio going financially, but we still had the same deal. I sent all the cheques back to Melbourne and we just divvied it up as normal.

mc: I do have an interesting note from [Ken] Cato from when we broke up. Even though he was at the opposite end of the scale he could see what we were trying to do because he is a very intelligent bloke. He's always acknowledged that there was a place for our kind of stuff.

All Australian Graffiti did not survive beyond the 1970s. The restlessness of those that brought it to life, also brought about its demise. After the breakup of the studio, the partners and employees went their separate ways. All were able to capitalise on the profile that All Australian Graffiti had achieved. Mimmo Cozzolino pursued his publishing interests, publishing *Symbols of Australia* while freelancing, ultimately founding another design studio, Cozzolino Ellett, with partner Phil Ellett. Con Aslanis shared a studio/gallery space in Albert Park that became the home of the Seal Club whilst also teaching part time. He now freelances from his studio in Windsor. Izi Marmur worked freelance for a variety of advertising agencies before founding his own agency, Adforce, with partner Peter Hughes in 1988. Adforce ceased operation in 1992 and Izi now runs, Izigraphics, a company that specialises in marketing based design. Geoff Cook continues to work as an illustrator on a freelance basis. Tony Ward worked as a freelance illustrator and for advertising agencies, including an eight year stint in Thailand as an art director. He is now teaching at the Swinburne University National School of Design, on the site of the old Prahran College of Advanced Education where he once taught Mimmo, Con, Geoff and Izi.

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