The subject of this essay is one of the most important travelling exhibitions ever to arrive in Australia, *Two Decades of American Painting* (henceforth, *Two Decades*), a large exhibition of postwar New York School paintings, many of which were indisputable masterpieces, coordinated and curated by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. During 1967 the exhibition toured to two Australian cities, first to Melbourne at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and then to Sydney at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), at the end of an itinerary that had comprised Kyoto in Japan and New Delhi in India.

The impact of this exhibition is indisputable. All artists and students active in Australia during the late 1960s remember visiting the show. It remains, for most, an indelible memory. *Two Decades* was one of the two major international exhibitions of contemporary art in the history of Australian art; the other, *French and British Contemporary Art*, was presented in 1939 at the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) in Adelaide, the Melbourne Town Hall in Melbourne and David Jones’ Art Gallery in Sydney.

The impact of *Two Decades* was enormous in terms of the public appreciation for what was then contemporary art. But the works appeared belatedly, most of them too late to genuinely have an influence on advanced Australian artists’ practices, except at the level of measuring size and ambition; for the world had already moved on, well beyond Abstract Expressionism and almost beyond Pop art. Even so, the minimalist muteness of both Ad Reinhardt’s notoriously blank ‘black squares’ and Andy Warhol’s soup cans still carried considerable incendiary charge, offending conservative artists and public alike. Above all, this was a watershed event at the end of one idea of Australian art and the start of another, and thus the exhibition’s reception and aftermath, including the art criticism it attracted and the shifts in touring exhibitions it announced, deserves a full account.

*Two Decades* was the result, unfashionable though it might seem to downplay covert hegemonic force, of the agency of cosmopolitan, internationalist individuals: NGV director Eric Westbrook and his exhibitions officer, John Stringer, and at the AGNSW, an energetic young curator, Daniel Thomas.
One year later, in 1968, the NGV followed up Two Decades, inaugurating its new premises in St Kilda Road with The Field, an exhibition of contemporary Australian art curated by John Stringer and Brian Finemore, consisting almost exclusively of colour-field and hard-edge painting and sculpture, but also including a cryptic early glimpse of conceptual art. Soon afterwards the NGV made a few adventurous purchases — including an important Donald Judd aluminium and perspex cube, Untitled, 1969–71, which was purchased in 1974. That year MoMA’s International Program had sent another substantial exhibition of American contemporary art, Some Recent American Art, 1974, to Australia, a survey of minimalism, process art and conceptual art assembled by MoMA’s influential and progressive curator, Jennifer Licht. This was a particularly challenging exhibition and an ideal follow-up to Two Decades.\(^6\)

Two Decades and its Cold War context

One explanation of the genesis of Two Decades could be to acknowledge its Cold War date – the mid 1960s – and to then adapt the Marxist art-historical narrative of American cultural imperialism and Cold War geopolitical domination, one hinted at in Ian Burn and his associates’ The Necessity of Australian Art (1988), prosayed overseas in Kodits’s (1975) and Guilbaut’s (1983) studies and, more recently, reinforced by studies that have foregrounded the CIA’s involvement with US cultural programs overseas, including that of the International Program.\(^7\) The reception of Two Decades would, as well, have been inflcted by the broader political and social context of the Cold War, the Vietnam War, worldwide anti-American feeling of the 1960s, as well as the emerging protests against Australia’s longstanding conservative state and federal governments. But in this case such explanations would be incorrect, even though during the 1950s and early 1960s the US Information Service (UIS), which was part-coordinator of Two Decades and MoMA’s International Council were indisputably linked to CIA personnel through cultural sponsorship aimed at projecting the prestige and power of American art.\(^8\)

However, this sponsorship had trailed off by the time of Two Decades, and the USIS had little involvement, though it had managed the small exhibitions prepared by MoMA’s International Council that had arrived in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, and these earlier exhibitions were far too humble to overwhelm home-grown culture; even the British Council was more effective in projecting national prestige into Australia. So, against the grain of recent scholarship’s consensus and many present-day Australians’ assumptions that there must have been covert money behind Two Decades, it should be remembered that it was Australians who proposed the exhibition travel to Australia and then largely paid for it. MoMA officials and others went to great lengths to extend the itinerary of Two Decades, but only after persistent and intense lobbying by representatives of the NGV and AGNSW, notably by John Stringer, who was based temporarily at MoMA on a work placement in 1966, and by Daniel Thomas, who Waldo Rasmussen consulted in 1966 when Thomas was passing through New York; later, Thomas kept AGNSW director Hal Missingham enthused about the show.

Seeking cash for culture

Australia needed to find the money to pay for the tour. It is clear that MoMA primarily wished to send the exhibition to Japan and India, and in the context of the mid 1960s it is obvious that there were powerful strategic and foreign-policy reasons why American cultural diplomacy to those nations rather than to Australia mattered, given the attempts from the Kennedy presidency on attempting to forge a closer relationship with India (the Russian- aligned leader of the non-aligned nations) and, given the considerable anti-American feeling in America’s closest East Asian ally, Japan. But even in India and Japan, both of which were more important to the US than Australia, local agencies had to find considerable money to cover costs. Financial negotiations of this kind were and are normal among art museums. So, it is far from clear that Australia mattered enough – based on the correspondence between MoMA and American and Australian government agencies – for the Americans to have registered any pressing need to be involved in the expense of such costly cultural projection. Australia was, after all, willingly involved in Vietnam already (an Australian battalion had been sent in 1965). Australians would have to pay for the exhibition and, when that seemed doubtful, Harold Meritz, an American who had recently formed a collection of contemporary Australian art to tour the United States, came to Australia. The show arrived more by lucky accident, individual persistence, newly available capabilities for airfreight and traditional American philanthropy than by American politico-cultural design. MoMA already had connections with Australia. A Sidney Nolan painting, After Glencoe, and a permanent collection of MoMA’s International Program – largely detached from the Museum’s principal curatorial activities – had begun in 1952, touring a series of exhibitions around the world, including to Australia. The program was strengthened from 1957 by sponsorship from the International Council.\(^9\) Maie Casey, who was to open Two Decades in Melbourne, had become a MoMA International Council member well before Two Decades; her frequent contacts with MoMA dated from the tenure of her husband, Richard Casey, as head of the Australian Embassy in Washington DC in the 1940s.\(^4\)
An exhibition that almost did not happen

Waldo Rasmussen, the executive director of circulating exhibitions at MoMA, responded to a letter from Pamela Warrender, chairman of the small, precariously funded and prestigious Museum of Modern Art and Design of Australia (MoMADA) that John Reed had established in Melbourne, in which he described to her an exhibition ‘tentatively titled Two Decades of American Painting’. The planning for the exhibition was already well advanced and Rasmussen was able to say there would be about one hundred paintings and included a list of thirty-five artists. It consisted of some key works from MoMA’s own collection but comprised a larger number carefully gathered from other American art museums, a range of excellent private collections, art dealers and directly from the artists. Many important works were, discreetly, available for sale – MoMA would put potential collectors or art museums in touch with dealers – for, in retrospect, extraordinarily low prices. The show was to travel to Kyoto, Japan, in October 1966 and New Delhi, India, until April 1967. It might conceivably be available to open in Melbourne on 1 June 1967. Rasmussen’s letter detailed the costings and obligations of hosting the exhibition. He was very helpful, simultaneously writing to the American Embassy in Canberra and to the US Department of State, requesting sponsorship of the exhibition in Australia even though he was not clear about where and what the Museum of Modern Art and Design was.17

Meanwhile, Pamela Warrender wrote a letter to the NGV to investigate the possibility of housing the exhibition, suggesting the NGV donate space, staff and resources to MoMADA for the show, and even collect and transfer to them the money from admissions and catalogue sales.18 By the time Rasmussen wrote to Stringer at the NGV, he realised that MoMADA was not in any position to host the exhibition, and that the only practical option for sending it to Melbourne was to deal with Victoria’s principal state art museum, the NGV.

New York connections

When John Stringer visited New York in 1964, Australian expatriate artist Clement Meadmore had introduced him to the famous New York School artist Barnett Newman, who in turn introduced Stringer to Rasmussen. This greatly facilitated the offer of Two Decades to the NGV. As yet, however, Rasmussen had not had any formal expression of interest from the NGV.22 Rasmussen began his letter by saying that he had met and spoken to Daniel Thomas, a curator at AGNSW, then visiting New York, who hoped that Two Decades could also go to Sydney. He told Stringer that the exhibition could go to both Sydney and Melbourne only if it travelled from India or Japan by air, rather than by sea, because of the time constraints of loan agreements; many paintings were on loan from private collectors. The problem was further compounded because some of the paintings were so large that they might not fit in commercial aircraft and might need to be shipped in military aircraft. It was clear that the exhibition needed the endorsement of both the US and Australian governments. Eric Westbroek replied enthusiastically on 5 August 1966, pointing out that MoMADA no longer had ‘any real existence’ and would be completely unable to host a show.23 He added that the NGV would need government assistance from the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board to meet the cost; this would be more likely to be forthcoming if the show also travelled to Sydney. His solution to the time constraint was to suggest that the Americans bring the exhibition straight to Australia from Japan, omitting the Indian venue.

From here on negotiations took a far less tentative note as arrangements for the exhibition dates quickly firm up. The sticking point remained the cost of transport. While all the governments concerned agreed that Two Decades was an excellent exhibition and more than welcome in their respective countries, they would not pay for the transport of the paintings. The problem was compounded because sending the exhibition to Sydney after its Melbourne showing would extend the loan of works well beyond the agreed period. Some lenders agreed to the extension but many did not. Waldo Rasmussen had to negotiate loan extensions and new replacement works, plus the shipping of these works to and from Sydney. The AGNSW director, Hal Missingham, was reluctant to agree to take the exhibition with replacement works, especially when their cost was unknown. The logjam was broken in December 1966 when, as mentioned, Harold Mertz offered to underwrite this cost from his Mertz Art Fund.24

Although there were to be squabbles about the discrepancy between the numbers of days the exhibition was shown in Sydney compared to Melbourne, and disagreements about other, similarly petty issues, the major negotiations had been completed. The correspondence about the exhibition shows that Missingham had been his often-cranky self when it came to managerial details, nearly summing up in his telegram to John Stringer: ‘Convinced all Yanks useless’.25 The more cosmopolitan Westbrook had seized the offered opportunity, a decision consistent with his entrepreneurial directorship throughout his tenure at the NGV, as Heathcote has accurately chronicled.26

The problems and expense of Two Decades were caused by the logistics of transporting one hundred paintings from New York to Kyoto, New Delhi, Melbourne, Sydney and then back to New York within a tight schedule, all of which was necessary if the pictures were to be returned within their loan period. The largest painting was almost three and a half metres square and some were approximately four and a half metres square. They were thought far too large for normal commercial airfreight, which was why Rasmussen sought military aircraft to transport the paintings but the cost was too high. They were eventually shipped by sea from India to Melbourne and by Qantas flights.
from Sydney back to the US. No paintings were damaged until they reached India where the galleries of the Lalit Kala Akademi proved to be less than ideal.12 Rasmussen sent detailed instructions to Stringer about the handling of the paintings in a letter dated 19 May.13 But there was more to come. When the exhibition was in transit back to New York from Sydney, crates containing three paintings were left out in tropical Brisbane rain and heat by airfreight handlers. The damage included irreparable harm to Larry Poons’s delicate Richmond ruckus, 1964. (Dear God, not the Poons!) wrote Stringer when he was informed of the catastrophe.14 Qantas eventually paid for the damage.

Two Decades open: shock, awe and art criticism

The exhibition was opened in Melbourne with great pomp and ceremony on 6 June 1967 by the Governor-General’s wife, Lady Casey. It was elegantly installed in the classically proportioned galleries of the building on Swanston Street usually occupied by the NGV’s permanent collection, which had been moved out for the occasion. The grand nineteenth-century spaces suited the paintings perfectly. There were the expected howls of philistine protest in Letters to the Editor of the city’s newspapers, including: “These art critics who pretend to rave over this collection are merely spinning elaborate phrases in describing something without meaning.”15 The young critic Patrick McCaughey wrote two impassioned, deeply complimentary reviews for The Age, as did the ubiquitous Daniel Thomas for The Sydney Morning Herald. John Henshaw and Ronald Millar published more equivocal but generally approving reviews.16

In an article published two days before the exhibition opened in Sydney, Daniel Thomas declared Two Decades ‘the most important exhibition ever seen in Australia’, commenting on the ‘enthusiasm and awe’ among the ‘fantastic traffic jams’ of people who had seen the exhibition in Melbourne. His essay is worth analysing since it communicates well the impact of the paintings in Two Decades.17 He stressed that American art of the past twenty years had been the ‘best new art’. He dismissed the criticisms that had been made of the paintings in Melbourne by the general public, conservative critics and artists; they were typical of the ‘cranky’, belonging to the ‘modern-art-is-all-a-hoax-and-a-conspiracy kind’. He then addressed the main cause of complaint, three extraordinarily austere, almost blank, black-on-black paintings by Ad Reinhardt: Abstract painting, 1966, Abstract painting, 1962, and Abstract painting, 1963. Those were the most challenging, reductive works in the show, and the ones most resonant with young artists but most offensive to members of the public. They were typical of Reinhardt’s late minimalist paintings, in which he subdivided monochrome surfaces into a few subliminally close-hued and close-toned squares.

Reinhardt shocks the hasty beholder

Thomas suggested his readers contemplate Reinhardt’s paintings themselves to discover what was transparently there to behold. He managed to convey the idea that the reader would be far too informed about contemporary art to fall into the trap of a mere ‘quick glance’. The hasty viewer would miss out on the true significance of these and all the paintings in the show, which was the ‘subtlety and fineness of the originals’. He emphasised the sheer size and presence of the works – this was a shock to local audiences – and their grandeur and aloofness; these were qualities superficially at odds with his previous point, but they were directly linked to their avant-garde nature, to the ‘radical development’ of a ‘large yet intimate picture’.

Again – and most perceptively, far more than any other reviewer of the time – Thomas emphasised the new role of the beholder. Those paintings, he said, must be ‘experienced in the original’ (rather than seen in photographs) to be properly appreciated. In summing up, Thomas noted how important this exhibition was for local reviewers, expecting that its effect ‘should not be evident for several years but it will surely be great’. Thomas’s essay was clever and not at all didactic, introducing ideas as if they were something already known but perhaps forgotten. The style was to be was typical of Thomas’s prose over his long career for the next few decades, presenting a deceptively populist argument in support of a challenging exhibition without being the least bit defensive or aggressive. Communicating to both casual viewer and specialist art audience, it typified what was to be Thomas’s place in the literature on contemporary Australian art: building a wider community rather than seeking to intervene directly.

Daniel Thomas’s hopes for the far-reaching benefits the show might have for painting in Australia were anaesthetic. Since the works belonged to the recent but rapidly receding past, they were ultimately irrelevant in the creation or diffusion of new art. But his essay must be placed in context to recreate the short-lived positive place of art criticism during the later 1960s and early 1970s in the reception of art new to Australia, of art such as that contained in Two Decades, and its advocacy of a new idea of Australian art. The dominant strain in mainstream art criticism after that time, from the 1980s, was quite different. But the role we have outlined in order to communicate the impact of the art in Two Decades was typical of Thomas’s place in the recent history of Australian writing on art as the only significant writer predominantly and primarily concerned with communicating to a broad general public who was committed to new art rather than to being reactionary or aggressive. Art curators and art historians (often the former have displaced the latter, who have no necessary or genuine commitment to a wide audience) rather than art critics have been the Australian champions of new art; and art history has been more often produced by curators such as Thomas (including in their pervasive outputs as critics in exhibition catalogues and art magazines) rather than academics. As such, and with his encyclopaedic knowledge of Australian art and empathy with living artists, Thomas’s writing was self-consciously that of an audience-building curator working as an art critic; the differentiation are important since they changed soon after Two Decades with large consequences for curators, art critics and art historians.18

Bargains of the century

The Reinhardt’s that Thomas wrote about were for sale, but no Australian museum would have been brave enough to consider acquiring them or any of the more radical large paintings; not Warhol’s great Electric chairs, 1964, which could have been acquired for US$6065; not Kline’s masterpiece, Shenendoah Wall, 1961, forbiddingly priced at $100,000; not Ellsworth Kelly’s Orange Blue Wall
Precursor of the blockbuster tradition

Crowds queued in Melbourne winter rain and the NGV extended its opening hours, as it was to do decades later with its blockbuster exhibitions in the early years of the twenty-first century. A simultaneous exhibition of Rodin sculptures was also attracting large crowds, as catalogue sales of 2447 for Two Decades and 2653 of Rodin and his Contemporaries attested (though the Two Decades catalogue cost $1 and Rodin cost $3). Two Decades attracted a staggering number of visitors (115,000 visitors in Sydney alone), but numbers consistent with the success of later imported blockbuster shows of modern and contemporary art, a sequence that was to continue from 1975 onwards.

The next show in the series was Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse, also a product of MoMA’s International Program, but one now tailored to the Australian box-office formula of Melbourne plus Sydney, given that both had gained state-of-the-art exhibition spaces.25 Modern Masters bookended Two Decades late modernist painting with great masterpieces from earlier phases of modernism, just as Some Recent American Art in 1974, the far more challenging exhibition of art made after the end of modernism, had been a follow-up to Two Decades. Crowd-pulling blockbusters such as Modern Masters have now come to dominate programs at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and at state art galleries in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, culminating at the NGV with the Melbourne Winter Masterpieces mega-exhibitions and, most spectacularly, with the round-the-clock visitor fever associated with the NGV’s 2009 exhibition Subtlety Dali: Liquid Desire.26 The curatorial ambition and innovation – the contribution to knowledge that such blockbusters were to embody, with rare exceptions such as the Dali show – was fairly passive and negligible, consisting primarily of a celebratory package with little genuine reassessment or local input. Unlike MoMA’s 1975 Modern Masters, such exhibitions often showcased a single collection, available during a period when an institution was closed, perhaps for renovation.

Nothing new to write or say

Two Decades was the continuation of MoMA’s earlier tradition of impeccably and knowingly selected touring exhibitions, painstakingly assembled in this case from many well-known and important lenders. Two Decades was not merely part of a collection exported during an institution’s downtime; it was a substantial

event, but even so, contained no new thesis about its art. The catalogue included a double-page spread for each artist, consisting of illustrations facing a checklist and a short biography. There were three short essays: the first, by young art historian Irving Sandler, foreshadowed the tone of his landmark book The Triumph of American Painting, which was to be published a mere three years later.27 It concentrated on Abstract Expressionists and colour-field painters, enthusiastically echoing the then virtually hegemonic taste of New York art critic Clement Greenberg. Through Rasmussen, Greenberg offered to come out to Australia for a speaking tour to be associated with the exhibition, but his demands for a first-class air ticket and considerable fees far exceeded the Australians’ budgets and he was turned down. A year later, Professor Bernard Smith, just appointed at Sydney University to head the new Power Institute, Australia’s second university art-history department, was to host Greenberg, who in turn presented the first Power Lecture, repeating it in Melbourne. The second essay was by Lucy Lippard, later to become a pioneering promoter of feminist and post-minimalist art. Her focus was on the rather restrained minimalist component of the exhibition, represented by Ad Reinhardt and Frank Stella; since it was an exhibition of paintings, there was of course nothing by minimalist sculptors Donald Judd or Dan Flavin, nor anything by any of the other, already famous, more conceptual minimalist such as Carl Andre or Sol LeWitt, all of whom were featured in the follow-up exhibition of recent American art, already mentioned, sent to Australia in 1974. A veteran exhibition director and curator, and far from conservative in his own artistic tastes and knowledge, Waldo Rasmussen was to continue in his position at MoMA with international exhibitions for many years more, well into the 1990s. He was to direct the US participation with Robert Ryman, Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt in

![Fig. 4. Josef Albers: Homage to the Square: Autumn 1966; AGNSW bought a similarly low-priced Albers, a yellow Homage to the square, 1966, from the artist’s extensive collection exported during an institution’s downtime; it was a substantial investment.](image)

Art Journal 50

Art Journal 50
the 1970 Delhi Triennial, at which Robert Hunter represented Australia and where Hunter met Andre. The two were to become good friends. The third essay for Two Decades, principally on Pop artists James Rosenquist and Robert Rauschenberg, was by maverick critic Gene Swenson, a tireless promoter of Pop art who had been working freelance at MoMA for a couple of years on special exhibitions. He was about to take up a lonely daily picket and protest outside MoMA, accusing the institution of ignoring social and political inequity, and he would then become closely connected with the notorious Art Workers Coalition (AWC).

Aftermath

Waldo Rasmussen flew to Australia for the Melbourne opening and then travelled to Sydney. He wanted to collect an archive of Australian art for MoMA's great reference library and was also interested in acquiring paintings for the collection. In Melbourne John Stringer took Rasmussen to visit several artists, most of whom were soon to be associated with dealer Bruce Pollock's gallery, Pincas/Leeuven. Through Stringer, Rasmussen was able to see Trevor Vickers's and Paul Partos's impressive, early minimalist works in their inner-city studios. In Sydney Daniel Thomas took Rasmussen to visit several Sydney galleries – notably Central Street Gallery – and artists' studios. They spent three days looking at paintings, sculptures and architecture across the city and its inner suburbs. These artists were to feature in Finemore and Stringer's exhibition, The Field, the following year. Their austere aesthetic, beginning to incorporate shaped and modular formats, already diverged from the works in Two Decades.

Though letters between the energetic Stringer and the indefatigable Rasmussen show that these visits were very stimulating and that the American curator was deeply impressed, the outcomes did not add up to much – except perhaps for Stringer, who was to move to New York in 1970 to take up a position at MoMA as Rasmussen's assistant director at the International Program – because of the lack of Australian follow-up and the generally lackadaisical attitude of many Australian artists and their dealers, an indifference that would certainly not be the case nowadays. Rasmussen wrote:

I hasten to say, though, that I should put a ceiling on the price because I received an astonishingly high bill for one group of slides from Melbourne which made me realise I hadn't been specific about what we could afford. We pay from $2 to $4 per slide here. This 'astonishingly high bill for slides' seems inexplicable today. Adjusted for inflation, a US$4 price tag for a duplicate slide in 1967 is equivalent to more than US$25 today, or at least US$30 per slide. But if, surprisingly, some galleries and artists apparently tried to profiteer from the sale of slides to MoMA, then others seemed reluctant to send them at all. Rasmussen wrote to John Stringer in Melbourne and Daniel Thomas in Sydney in October, nearly five months after his June visit, asking for these slides: I'm anxious to report to a curatorial committee in the museum on work by Australian artists in the early part of November, and I still haven't received any from Sweeney Reed of [Col] Jordan, [Ken] Reinhard and [Sydney] Ball, nor gotten any from Robert Jacks ... I'm afraid my report will lose its point if I can't show the material soon. This, in turn, leads us to ask if confident predictions about the influence of Two Decades were realised? John Stringer's perhaps unexpected recollection of the exhibition’s impact, as he railed through his studio visits and selection for the landmark NGV exhibition The Field during the following year, is worth quoting at length: While the more informed were generally impressed and very supportive of the exhibition, far more significantly, the young found they had an unprecedented opportunity to pass judgement on the entire preceding generation of painters. Though not without admiration, the vanguard quickly concurred that abstract expressionism had already run its course. It was equally apparent that the abrasive commercialism of pop art was being eclipsed by the more disciplined, cool, purist strain of formalism of minimal art. In terms of timing it could not have been better for those already on the path of abstraction but bewildered by the alternatives. The path was clear.

In a review of Two Decades, Patrick McCaughey wrote:

Once again Melbourne has been dragged screaming into the 20th century. The hostile, even contemptuous, reactions to the exhibitions of Two Decades of American Painting at the National Gallery [of Victoria] show just how insular a view of contemporary art many people carry around with them.

McCaughery was clearly driven as much by the hostile response of many local writers and artists as by any public reaction, and almost certainly at the back of his mind was incredulity at the possibility of a reprise of the public scandal of the 1939 French and British Contemporary Art exhibition in Melbourne and the desire to de-fang any revival of a home-grown artistic xenophobia.

Conclusion

Two Decades was an exhibition important for what its reception demonstrated: Australian art had arrived at a watershed. This is why people remember the exhibition with such intensity. One world was fading and another had arrived and come into focus. Making and understanding Australian art as regional art – landscape or Antipodean-style allegorical figuration – was exhausted and now reactionary. Conservative critics such as Alan McCulloch and artists such as Noel Counihan (who deplored the ‘dehumanised values’ of Two Decades), social realists Herbert McClintock (‘It is contempt. Contempt for the cultural achievements of mankind’) and Rod Shaw (‘I find it disturbing to see human beings gazing at Reinhardt’s black squares with reverence and awe, as if a prophet had emerged’) or neo-Romantic Francis Lymburner (‘Utterly boring. Complete rubbish ... I think it has no relevance whatever for Australian art’ lamented the absence of a recognisable sympathetic humanism in Reinhardt,
D’Arcangelo, Rosenquist, Larry Rivers or Alex Katz, but they failed to see that the superficially distinctive, supposedly recurring landscape–figure theme of Boyd and Nolan represented only one stream of Australian art history and this no longer compelled innovative artists. This failure, not philistinism, was why older artists and writers on art were so suspicious of the imaginary excesses of a great exhibition of already dated but indisputably epochal American painting. But, then again, the sombre humanism of *Two Decades*’ Abstract Expressionist and austerely tragic Pop art masterpieces – invisible to these older critics and artists – was itself already under attack from yet more advanced artists. *Two Decades of American Painting* was less a catalysing event for Australian art than – in its polarised reception – the demonstration of the passing of the idea of Australian art itself and thus a watershed moment.
In the National Gallery of Art’s Dutch Galleries is a portrait on a piece of wood about the size of a shingle. Vermeer’s “Girl With the Red Hat” catches a passing moment, a glance, on its way from here to somewhere else. It’s one of a handful of paintings I’ve visited twice a month for decades. It’s not an artist thing anymore—we’re old friends. I say hello and soak into the portrait, like a droplet into a sponge. One day, the painting looked different. The painting wasn’t so much three-dimensional more as if someone flipped a playing card at it, the card would disappear into 17th-century Delft and land in the girl’s lap. Her tentative glance was the hinge that opened that trans-temporal window. Vermeer, working with busy little sable brushes, rendered a loophole in time.