

# ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES ARCHIVE BALNAVES FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN SCULPTURE ARCHIVE PROJECT

## Interview with Asher Bilu

28 November 2014

This is an edited transcript of an interview with Asher Bilu on 28 November 2014 in Melbourne, Victoria, by Deborah Edwards, senior curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for the Balnaves Foundation Australian Sculpture Archive Project.

The project focuses on significant Australian sculptors and sculptural practice. It was developed with a grant from the Balnaves Foundation in 2010, which supported the recording and transcription of interviews with artists and other figures in Australian art.

### About Asher Bilu

Asher Bilu (born 1936) produces paintings, sculptures, installations and works that blur the boundaries between them. These abstract works reflect his interest in light, music and science (particularly cosmology). His 1967 work *Sculptron I* has been called the first electronic sculpture exhibited in Australia.

*This is an edited transcript of a recorded interview. Some adjustments, including deletions, have been made to the original as part of the editing process; however, the accuracy of all statements has not been verified and errors of fact may not have been corrected. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent those of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Unedited audio files of this interview are in the Gallery's archive.*

## Interview on 28 November 2014

Asher Bilu (AB): You conduct the interview; you can ask me the questions and follow through, and let's see what happens.

Deborah Edwards (DE): OK, it's a combination of getting biographical details sorted and then talking specifically about certain works. So, you were born in 1936 [in Israel] and arrived in Australia in 1956, aged 20. I wonder if you could describe the art scene when you arrived here and which directions you wanted to go in relation to it. You were painting when you arrived and continued to for some time. I know you had been doing a lot of drawing in the army.

AB: When I arrived I knew I was going to be an artist, that was a given. A big surprise to my parents but nevertheless there was no looking back, and I had to start somewhere. When I arrived here I didn't know anyone, and I didn't know anything much about the art scene. I went to the Australian Embassy in Tel Aviv to have a look and see what I could find out about the art scene, and there was very little. The only thing that was intriguing was a book about Russell Drysdale where I saw *The cricketers* and red desert paintings which intrigued me, and I thought that was Australia.

DE: Was that partly why you chose to come to Australia? And after that, why to Melbourne?

AB: Well, that was Australia, but Melbourne was because my parents chose to live here. They emigrated to Australia. Perth was where they first went, Melbourne after that.

DE: I hadn't realised you came out with them.

AB: No, I came out well after them. I served in the army, and my parents were already in Australia. It seemed like such a faraway and exotic place, why not come and have a look?

DE: Why did they come to Australia?

AB: They came for their own private reasons; it's a bit complicated. They came with my younger sister, and as I say, I finished my stint in the army, and what to do? I thought I'd come and have a look and be with my parents again. Because before that I was in the kibbutz – educated in the kibbutz – so I was without my parents for quite a while. I didn't know much more about Australia than the Olympic Games, which was just happening, so Australia was on everyone's lips. I thought I was going to come to Drysdale's country but I came to Footscray instead. Not a pretty place but it was very interesting, actually incredible. In retrospect, the experience was amazing because it was the hub of newcomers, as we were called, different nationalities, and my parents had a business there, a restaurant dining place, and it was a centre. My parents spoke different languages, so it became a centre. All the bodgies and the widgees and all of the newcomers you could think of were there – a central meeting place.

DE: And for artists too?

AB: No, not artists. I had just arrived and I was longing to make contact. In desperation I thought I'll just enrol myself in a drawing course at RMIT [Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology].

DE: You had no interest in going to the National Art Schools [Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria Art School]?

AB: I don't think I even knew there was a National Art School. I think it was RMIT. But just to make contact, just to know where to get art materials, I attended a couple of classes but I realised this was definitely not for me, because it was drawing nudes, with easels. I escaped immediately. It didn't work for me whatsoever. So eventually I set myself up in a studio in [in the Melbourne suburb of] St Kilda. St Kilda became a central aspect of my life, faraway from Footscray, and I made contact with people and within a year or two I got my first show.

DE: That was at the Alan Davie Gallery?

AB: Yes, the first little gallery that was established in suburbia. There was the Australian Galleries in Collingwood; other than that all the galleries were in the city. Alan Davie showed abstract works of Melbourne and Sydney artists. Artists that otherwise wouldn't have a hope of getting a show elsewhere. People like [Thomas] Gleghorn and Bill Rose and Erica McGilchrist, Dawn Syme, all sorts of artists like that. John and Sunday Reed and Georges Mora came and bought paintings and that triggered my beginning here, because I met different artists – like Don Laycock, with whom I had a very close friendship until today. I got a review – Alan McCulloch – it was the first time he had ventured outside the city to suburbia. It was the beginning.

DE: Could you describe your artistic preoccupations at that time?

AB: I was experimenting. It was such early days for me. I didn't think I had quite found my voice; that would come later.

DE: But you were an abstract artist.

AB: Oh yes, I was abstract, from the outset. I was under the spell of people like Paul Klee and [Antoni] Tàpies. I absorbed until then. I had never been to art school. Museums, books, I absorbed as much as I could, and I was very fortunate to meet artists and be inspired by artists who pushed me forward. Right from my childhood there was always an artist living where we were living, and some of them famous in Israel. I was subconsciously surrounded by art. I didn't know I was going to be an artist. I was playing the violin, so I was close to the art world, so to speak.

So it was fantastic to have this first show, and at this first show I was already experimenting, I was already pushing in new directions. In fact, one of the paintings that was there – I was reminded of this by a multi-billionaire, but at the time he was a student of law in Melbourne University (my age now), he remembered one painting from that show, about six by four, a big painting in those days. I painted it on egg cartons using beeswax. I stuck the egg cartons onto the surface and painted on top of that with beeswax, and I cut little shapes and holes into the egg cartons, and it was interesting in every way as already it was a kind of three-dimensional effect. I destroyed that painting, I don't know why.

DE: Did you sell paintings from that show?

AB: Sunday Reed bought two paintings. I sold rather well for those days. The paintings were seven to 15 guineas or something like that. I sold well, I made contacts, it was a wonderful beginning.

DE: How important was it for you from this beginning to be an artist whose expression was in line with contemporary times? A lot of artists who became interested in light and technology have spoken to me about the fact that right from the beginning, it was very important to be producing work that was relevant to the time, utilising the era's new technology.

AB: What is time? To me, time, eternity, the cosmos ... In the context of art you have to put things into context. You have to look at the past, look at the present. You are alive. I knew from the outset that if I wanted to make a mark I had to be original, but with respect to what was done before, and what has been happening now, but also looking ahead. This painting I did with beeswax ... Using beeswax goes back to Coptic times because Coptic paintings in the monastery were done in beeswax and look as fresh as [if] they were done now. That was already in my mind. I thought, I will use beeswax, as it was done then, it is available now, and in the spirit of Paul Klee of experimenting and mixing this with that. Because when you start you are so intimidated. With oil painting they tell you if you don't do this right, layer on top of the other layer, it will crack. You are concerned, so as soon as you free yourself from the dos and don'ts ... The beeswax was fantastic.

Through the Reeds I met Arthur Boyd who introduced me to the beekeeper who was living close to him at Beaumaris at the time. From him I bought piles of beeswax. I made my own paints, and I used beeswax in some major works, and also using heat – encaustic, which I later applied to other mediums I discovered. I loved the idea of heat and fire, of transforming. That was something I found really exciting, and water and fire became a feature in my work. Like this painting [gesturing to a painting in the room]. This is one of my earliest paintings, and it is all fire, and this one is water and fire. The beeswax led to other materials, and I've never looked back. It used to be just oils and watercolour. I remember when acrylics first came in. Do you know what we used at the time? What is acrylic? It is wood-glue, PVA, polyvinyl acetate. PVA was a wood glue. I went to the carpenter and bought a couple of gallons of PVA, the wood glue, and mixed it with pigment and that was PVA, and all of a sudden everybody was using acrylic paint, manufacturing acrylics.

DE: A number of artists were also using house paints. Your first show was in 1959. Certainly by the 1960s the entire field was a greatly expanded one in relation to materials.

AB: You can see people like Tapiés, and Elwyn Lynn. Elwyn Lynn was a friend of John Reed and used to correspond with him on a continuous basis. One of the first paintings I saw in the Reeds' Museum of Modern Art [in Melbourne] was an Elwyn Lynn painting. I still have it in front of me, and he was very much under Tapiés' spell, and he liked what I was doing. We didn't meet until he started reviewing shows and he reviewed my shows all the time. I had a wonderful response from him because I was experimenting with different materials.

DE: And very positive responses from James Gleeson.

AB: Gleeson, oh my god. He was a wonderful man, and we became good friends. He also was very generous in his reviews with praise for my work. But he only reviewed the early work created with resin and fire and water. Later I moved on to new materials.

DE: The experimentation with materials can be seen as very much part of the interests of progressive artists of the period. But, philosophically, are you saying that you were also interested in elemental themes from the outset? And in several years, you will incorporate contemporary technologies and mediums into your art and, I assume, aim to forge a particular statement with these. So, if we move towards the genesis of your sculpture *Sculptron* [1967], when did the idea of contemporary technology, electronics etc start to be of real interest to you?

AB: Well, it was when the term 'art and technology' came to the fore. The first people, like Nam June Paik, and kinetic art in its earliest forms, the idea that you can break the surface. The egg cartons were in 1959! I already knew that you could push the boundaries and break away from the flat surface, and then kinetic art started to appear.

DE: Although not in Australia in 1959. Most sculptors I've spoken to who were developing along different lines in the late 1950s and the 1960s were either subscribing to international art magazines or going into public libraries to read them.

AB: I went to London as soon as I sold my *Chariot* to Margaret Carnegie for a lot of money.

DE: That was after your 1963 show?

AB: Yes, I went to London and there things opened up. I became more aware of kinetic art and 'art and technology' became something of a buzz, but I didn't really know ... It was on my mind, but then I didn't choose to go there until I came back – and I discovered the cathode rays. That was the key for me because I was quite happy with painting. I'm still happy with painting and my experimenting. The paintings you saw before in the studio, these are new but they are all an outcome of a technique I developed. I am always thinking ahead. Basically I am saying the same thing but in a different way – that's what we do.

DE: I remember Robert Klippel saying to me once that you develop a set of core preoccupations very early on, and then you move more deeply in them, or slightly to the side of them, but you develop what is going to be central to you generally early and then you are in a very good position if you can keep moving. Some artists don't.

AB: Absolutely, and Robert and I were good friends, and we thought alike. If you look at his work and my work, there is continuity. I can't understand how artists can be one thing and then a complete other – for example, to move from lyrical abstraction to gory realism. It's fascinating how one can do it.

DE: But that could also be about artistic maturity. There was a great wave of artists moving into colour-field and hard-edge painting in the 1960s, and then moves out from that.

AB: I saw these painters in London. The whole colour-field thing was done there, it was done here. I never wanted to be that. I just wanted to be me, and stuck to this, and that's it. I have full admiration for people like Brett Whiteley, who was in the middle of all of the colour-field painting, and he did his own thing in spite of all that was happening around him.

DE: To re-cap slightly, in 1962 you had a show at Kym Bonython's and Margaret Carnegie purchased a work from that show?

AB: No, Margaret Carnegie purchased a work from my studio. This painting – which I bought back from auction many years later – is where I found my voice. This is a key painting, when I knew that that was me. I felt with everything in me, that this is me, this is the beginning – *The chariot* – I think dated 1960. This painting here – *Captain Spider* [gestures to another work] – is dated 1958; this is where I found my technique, but you can see [Jean] Dubuffet there, the figure is pure Dubuffet. I was very much under his influence. But *The chariot*: whenever I think of this painting I think of Seamus Heaney. I heard an interview with him. He said when you are young, when you are 16 or 17, you can do something that is incredible. He said he had written a poem at 16–17 that he knew was absolutely fantastic, and then he said it was downhill all the way. And I think this can be so true. You do something that you know you can never repeat, that stands the test of time, like this painting *The chariot*. Maybe it's been downhill for me all the way from there.

DE: From your perspective, it is a seminal work for you and sets you on a particular path.

AB: Look, you are finding your voice. If you are a musician you work your butt off for hours and hours and you are influenced by this and by that, and when you find your voice in whatever field you are in, when you realise you are no longer a captive anymore, you are

still influenced by everything around you but there is something that is your own. This is so important. This is the moment in anyone's life, artistically.

DE: For some it doesn't come. Lyndon Dadswell, the sculptor, was a very humble man and a successful man but it is heart-wrenching to read his interviews, where he says late in his career that he felt that he never really found his way. That's very tough, though I don't think completely uncommon. In relation to London, how did the Rowan Gallery show come about for you in 1963. You were in London by 1962. How long did you stay there?

AB: I stayed a couple of years. London was fabulous. Everybody went to London. Bryan Robertson was there, who organised the first Australian show there. He came to my studio.

DE: Did you have introductions to various people?

AB: Well, I knew Bryan Robertson, and Charles Blackman, John Perceval and Arthur Boyd, all through the Reeds and the Museum of Modern Art and through showing here. Robertson came to my studio but I wasn't chosen to be in the Australian show for some reason.

DE: You weren't thinking of any formal instruction in London, were you?

AB: No, no, I was very happy with what I was doing. So I went to London and my dear friend Judy Cassab was in London and was at a dinner party with the people from the Rowan Gallery and she told them about this young artist and that they should check him out, so they came and had a look at my work and offered me a show in their gallery. People like Leonard French were there and Peter Upward, and they were looking for a show but couldn't get one, the upstart got a show. It was fantastic, and I had a wonderful response. I was then invited to show in the Netherlands.

DE: Ah, yes, the Rotterdam show. So how many paintings were in the Rowan Gallery show and what kind of works were they?

AB: They were textured paintings with pigments I was using, not beeswax. I found a way to use pigments that I mixed with acetone and a small amount of binder to highlight the pigment itself. What Anish Kapoor did later on. I started to explore the glory of the pigment itself, so a lot of the paintings have this glow of pigment. That was the first show and then they offered me another show in two years time but I thought I was not going to stick around in London in that weather. My second child was born there. I couldn't live in London for another two years waiting for a show in that weather, I just wanted to come back to Australia, so I did and when I returned the Reeds gave me their house in Aspendale, to stay there, and I found a fabulous studio in South Yarra that once belonged to Robert Jacks and Guy Stewart. But before that, in London before I left, I stayed in Peter Upward's studio. He had moved out. We were good friends at the time. It was quite a wonderful scene in London then, because there were so many artists – Michael Johnson, Brett Whiteley, Robert Owen, Leonard Hessing – so many artists were there. But I just wanted to come back to Australia.

But when I came back, 'art and technology' was on my mind, and then I discovered these cathode rays. And the interesting thing about cathode rays was – this guy, Robin Fox (I read on his website that he is working with lasers now), he discovered the cathode rays first. Cathode rays are basically the television screen. Basically we are talking about oscilloscopic technique or an oscilloscope. Remember when you used to go to the doctor and they checked your blood pressure and you saw the graph going up and down? This is a cathode ray, this is the oscilloscope. It gives you a signal that goes up and down and if you connect it in different ways, it gives other signals, and they use them in things like airport observation towers, so you have very big ones and they trace the flight patterns of planes and you can see it all on the radar screen: these are sophisticated oscilloscopes. They are basically

pattern forming. The intriguing aspect of them and of electronics is that patterns like that, is that the pattern is the sound. It is an integral part of the equation: the pattern is actually a sound, and you can translate the sound into an image or the image into a sound. You can have a microphone and the image will create the sound or the sound will create the image. It's just the one thing: you can connect them in this way, and that I found really fascinating. And also we are talking about lines and geometry – the basics – because geometry is the basis of everything.

DE: And you were interested in such mathematical systems? Did you become interested in dynamic ...

AB: No, not dynamic symmetry. I have no rules when I paint. And I am not a mathematician. Nevertheless, I am always aware of the geometry, the lines, the underlying structure – symmetry, for example, or the mathematical systems relating to the planets.

DE: Were you, like a lot of artists at this time, also intrigued by John Cage's music performances in New York as part of the whole 'art and technology' explosion?

AB: Yes, but that came later, experimental music and minimal music and Kurt Schwitters' amazing recordings. A lot of artists really connected to sound as well as images. But here you get this electronic aspect which is state of the art, so to speak. An integral aspect of mathematics ... Anyway when I realised the complexity ...

DE: How did you first come across them?

AB: Because I am a scavenger. I went into a kind of army disposal place, a junk shop. Artists used to frequent junkyards.

DE: Yes, Klippel and [Colin] Lanceley, with their wooden maritime parts and Klippel's typewriter parts.

AB: One of my favourite junkyards was Ma Dalley's here in Melbourne, just on the outskirts of the city. I've got things that I got from that junkyard more than 50 years ago. So I went to this army disposal shop and I saw these cathode rays. They had a narrow neck, and there was something very slender about them that I thought I would be able to incorporate into a sculpture in some way. Anyway, I met this electronics engineer and we started to talk and we talked about oscilloscopic patterns and what they could do. I loved it, because I could incorporate ... I think I got about eight of them, which was a fluke, to get this particular shape. Basically you can make an oscilloscope in a milk bottle; people can make them themselves. You just put two cans of rays in a vacuum and you can create a screen. It's not rocket science. In those days we used valves. Remember the radio had valves, little bottles full of valves with electronics inside. They were replaced by transistors; tiny little things, but they were really expensive at the time. A lot of people believe that the valves are better than all this digital stuff, but you and I won't know the difference. But that's how it was at the time. Anyway, I realised this is fantastic, and I designed *Sculptron*, which visually was a beautiful thing to look at but also did the electronic thing.

DE: Did finding the CRTs prompt you to move into three-dimensional work or had you already produced sculptures? It seems, in some ways, just to come out from nowhere, this very sophisticated piece of kinetic-electronic-light sculpture, which seems also to have associations with the organic – flowers etc. It is a very remarkable piece of sculpture in the history of Australian art.

AB: Well, I had these cathode rays, I knew what they could do, and I thought I've got to present them in some sort of way. If I'd wanted to go absolutely pure, I could put them on a

table, connect them with the wires, and let the wires run on the floor without any aesthetic aspect, and plug them in and look at the screens and be pure about it. But I wanted to make a piece of sculpture, and wondered how could I make a sculpture out of that. It had to look like a piece of sculpture but it also had to function as an electronic piece. The idea was basically that I was making a visual-musical instrument: it was a musical instrument and it was visual. When you look at a violin, it is a piece of sculpture. The saxophone is a beautiful piece of sculpture. Here I was making in the spirit of these. A violin is crafted, it is a beautiful piece of sculpture if you look at it that way. The form and function is what it is about. So in that spirit I needed to make a sculpture that would look like a beautiful piece of sculpture and give me what I wanted in terms of electronics as part of the visual itself.

DE: This is the first piece of electronic sculpture exhibited in Australia. How did you find your way to the electronic engineer, Tim Berriman?

AB: It was just a fluke, he was a friend of a friend and we met. I didn't think about a choice of engineer.

DE: I have read somewhere that you put the project to Georges Mora and he gave you some support, some seeding money to try and develop it.

AB: Indeed.

DE: Had you already shown with him?

AB: Yes, we were close friends for years, ever since my first show. Long before he was an art dealer, he frequented the Museum of Modern Art with John Reed. He was involved with the Contemporary Art Society, and he was closely connected with artists, with Blackman and Perceval. And when he started his gallery I put the idea to him, and he was struggling at the time as well, and we didn't know how much it was going to cost or anything like that, we were working on the smell of an oily rag, and he gave us a bit of money, something to start with.

DE: And Berriman was working in a government department somewhere?

AB: Yes, he was working in Civil Aviation.

DE: I mentioned [Stanislaus] Ostoja-Kotkowski to you earlier, that he found his way to electronic engineers in Adelaide through the Philips company, and also through government weapons research in South Australia. That's where he found his electronic engineers. Because you did have to go looking for them then, didn't you?

AB: Yes, you certainly needed an engineer. There is no other way. But the engineer just does what he's asked to do. There is no artistic input from the engineers. I said, 'Can you ignite these cathode rays and put them in this box?', and that's what the engineer does.

DE: You didn't have the sense at the time, as a number of artists did, that we were going to move into a new era concerning the definition of the artist and that it was going to very much be about collaboration with industry and science? That was certainly floating around at the time.

AB: It felt like a novel idea. An engineer may have no artistic feel, he is not an artist. I just needed to get someone to wire the bloody piece, to make it work, and not to get involved with the artistic aspect, other than understanding what I want as an artist. Can you make it? And can you make it safe and durable? So it is the design, it's electronics, all of the technical know-how, but basically his work is not what art is about. That is the artist's role.



DE: In the 60s there were lengthy discussions about art in the expanded field and that a way forward may well be through collaboration with people such as engineers, but ultimately there were casualties. The artist has a vision and wants that facilitated. By the 1960s artists are realising that there is an enormous range of contemporary materials and technologies that they can use, but they don't have the specialist knowledge to incorporate them.

AB: Just having the engineer doing what he is asked to do. The design has to be worked together with the artist. I have to accommodate the design in terms of what the technology can provide me.

DE: So you spent a lot of 1966 working with Berriman on this.

AB: It was a year. A year of holding your breath, and waiting, because he couldn't give me his full time, he had a day job, and I didn't have the money to employ an electronics engineer. I would love to have! We could have done it in a month but, instead, a whole year of absolute agony. But I waited, and I painted in the meantime. That's what it took. We learnt a lot. Anyway, the thing was done, it was exhibited and it looked fantastic. And what is interesting with this Fox guy is that he started with the cathode rays. I would like to meet him one day and talk to him, because from what I understand of what he is doing with lasers now, it is the same principle. He has translated sound into light and images, and vice versa. The same thing as done with the oscilloscope was done with the laser: the sound, the music and image are one. You hear the sound and you see the patterns but on a vast scale with the power of the lasers. Where the cathode ray is contained, the laser goes on forever, and the whole volume of the place becomes the laser; it is fantastic.

I had one experience in Rajasthan. There was a Jain temple and it was having a ceremony of some kind. We were staying nearby and thought we would have a look. It was a stone temple, hundreds of years old, and it was open. The sound that came out of it! We walked in and in the centre was an open altar, and the sound was unbelievable. We were transfixed, absolutely frozen. It came from everywhere. I went around into the other area to see where the sound was coming from. Around the corner there was one guy with two timpani; he had two mallets in his hands and he was beating on the drums, and that sound permeated through the whole building and had an extraordinary effect. And this laser light had the same effect. The sound speakers were enormous. It was pure electronic sound, seriously physical, incredible power. The music was physical, right through your body, and combined with these powerful lasers. And it's all geometry, all lines. You can make fluid lines, or if the music is staccato, the lines went like that [gestures]. It was integral, one with it. It takes your breath away.

DE: The idea with your *Sculptron* was that it was interactive, it was responsive.

AB: The idea with *Sculptron* was that we had a microphone which picked up the sound and transformed it into patterns on the screen, or you could bring it up in such a way. We had the knobs there so that by 'twittling' with them you could create sound. So it was the beginnings of a very sophisticated instrument. You can take any instrument and connect it to an oscilloscope and as you make any sound you can see it on the screen. But to turn it into a sculpture that was a beautiful piece in itself, I think that was what I aimed for.

DE: Tell me what position light occupies in that scenario.

AB: The light was the most beautiful part of it, because the room was dark. The room was lit by these cathode rays, of fluorescence. It had a lampshade around it that was also reflecting the back of the screen, so I tried to utilise the cathode rays, apart from showing with them, to highlight the back of them as well, and the colour. So there was a kind of eerie beautiful kind

of light in the room, which was a result of the green cathode rays and the pinks of the fluorescent light around it. Make the most of what you have. Translate it into a piece of sculpture. That was the aim. It had to look as aesthetically as beautiful as I could make it.

DE: You were already starting to think about light in certain ways, weren't you? You won the Blake Prize. The symbolism of light perhaps has a part to play there.

AB: When we talk about paintings and art, it is the light in [JMW] Turner, the light in Rembrandt. What is it that makes the painting work? It is the light. [Johannes] Vermeer. These artists taught me by example, and light certainly played a part in my Blake Prize painting *I form light and create darkness: Isaiah 45:7*.

DE: There is a very complex symbology of light, a metaphysics of light in the Western tradition, along with other traditions, isn't there? You were already partaking of that perhaps, but with *Sculptron* I think it is more a case of talking about light basically in relation to aesthetics, isn't it?

AB: Yes, aesthetics, and technology working in the service of art. Alan McCulloch – I think it was McCulloch – mentioned the thing I was not too happy about which was the plug-in aspect. But Patrick McCaughey wrote an ecstatic review of it. He was a very young art critic at the time.

DE: Have you seen his recent book?

AB: I've seen his new book. I think he has forgotten about my existence. I'm not in his book. Anyway, Alan McCulloch said in his review, 'Well, what happens when you take the plug out?' And this really was the feeling all the time. It's all very well, but what happens when you take the plug out. This is the nature of the beast, but it is a drawback. If there is a power failure, the work is dead. It might still look nice, but the life is gone. We've seen a few shows with technical aspects where the damn things didn't work. How annoying is that!

DE: Yes, it reminds me of the Art and Technology events in New York with Billy Klüver, what they said about setting those up in the 60s. The mythology was that they were extraordinary experiences/happenings but the reality was that they worked less than 50 percent of the time because of problems with the technology. People were ushered into the Old Armory building for the 'happenings' and they were apparently, quite often, deflating experiences. But technology offered delivery of effects that had not been seen before.

AB: We are flying in planes, for god's sake.

DE: Are you implying that McCulloch's question affected you? Were you already thinking, 'This is not something I want to pursue'?

AB: It's all a question of money. I've got this fantastic idea. I want to take this tower here [gestures to an object] – a beautiful thing to look at, without the light, during the day. I like it, I like this tower, it features in my work. The column, it relates to [Constantin] Brancusi's 'Endless' sculpture [*Endless column*]. This is endless as well. It implies going forever in the way it's been made and the way it's conceived. I wanted to do a version of this using LED lights, but creating a real 'wow' effect. To do this, I have a good friend who is an electronic engineer, and we can achieve this, but it is money. I don't want to start struggling and doing something that is pissy.

DE: I guess it would need to be a major commission.

AB: It would have to be, but what is major? It is seriously doable, but to make something that stops you in your tracks, there is a lot of wiring involved. I'm thinking of doing a small one, maybe a metre high first. This one I didn't trial, I knew what I wanted, but to make the whole thing, lit ... I want to make something that will make you want to go on your knees, like you saw lightning for the first time.

There are so many sculptures now with light. One of the most powerful things I saw, many years ago in New York, was at PS1. I went to PS1, we went up the stairs into serious darkness and entered a void. We were primed, going through that darkness, and then suddenly into this void, and there was one line which almost touched the ground, going from one corner to the other, a line of green light. It wasn't a neon tube, but perhaps a liquid that filled a tube and glowed in the dark.

DE: Who was the artist?

AB: I don't know, but it was just that glowing line going from one side to the other, that simple, but you couldn't see where it was coming from or where it was going. It was just an arc of light, from one corner to the other, glowing green fluorescent light.

DE: For you, does light have as visceral effect on one as music does? Is that part of your receptivity to light?

AB: Ultimately the plug-in aspect worries me. How you get something that is light but is not lighting. That green light, that tube of green fluorescence was not plugged in. It was so simple but so powerful. That arc was just part of a circle, a huge circle, it was infinity itself, and the dark space around it – it was breathtaking, it was pure light. I was seriously jealous. The laser thing is fantastic but there is a lot of machinery, a lot of plug-in, in the sound, the speakers.

DE: Well, you also start to move into the arena of spectacle there.

AB: How can you put something like this in the gallery? Because it will dominate. The sound has to be as powerful as the light. It has to be absolutely physical to the core – and that was what it was about [the green light work], just silent, one shaft of light, floating in this void, and you floated with it, you didn't see the horizon line.

DE: Just going back then, what actually did you want to achieve with *Sculptron*? And by the way, I am assuming the obvious, that you called it *Sculptron* because it was a piece of sculpture and electronics? And it was *Sculptron I*, wasn't it?

AB: Yes, absolutely. If I was to do this light column that I still have in my mind, I would call it *Sculptron II*, with no hesitation. The idea is not static. These LEDs would make patterns, endless patterns going every which way, receptive to others, in the same principle [as *Sculptron*]: a computer program that does all this on this sculpture, which is just like a screen ...

DE: One of the things Patrick McCaughey said about *Sculptron I*, which perhaps segues into the idea for the *Infinity towers*, was that you had said to him that one aspect of making *Sculptron* that you really enjoyed, and one of the things that might propel you into working in this way, was that you were making an environment. So you had become interested in the idea of the artwork creating an environment. You are starting to move, with light and electronics, into the idea of enveloping the viewer into a larger environment, and this continues in your work, doesn't it? And light seems to be an important part of this.

AB: This is what the piece is – invisible! You don't need to have the latest, always new. The laser of yesterday is going to be the light bulb of tomorrow. Lasers are used for everything, they are used everywhere, but you can use simple light forms, invisible, ordinary lighting. It's how you light these lights up and what you make them do which makes the artwork.

DE: The fact that laser can travel kilometres. I think laser technology began in the 1940s, during World War II as far as I can remember, and I remember reading artists' statements extrapolating that light like this was going to be the primary material of the art of the future.

AB: One of the biggest light shows, one of the most fantastic impressions that I had as a young boy, very young, during the war, was that the skies were lit with searchlights, and zeppelins were up there, and I remember going to Haifa, which was a port town. Of course the English were in charge at the time and it was an important place, and so all the searchlights were concentrated around there, and to go at night and see the searchlights going, dozens of them, was extraordinary, it was incredible.

DE: I think that was probably extremely important for you, don't you?

AB: It was an art piece. When you see one searchlight it's terrific, but when you see the whole sky it is something again. And this is exactly what I have done with *Explanandum*. It is exactly that. I've taken a searchlight, a spotlight, and I've arrested it by putting a mirror at the end, containing the spotlight, to make it into a tube of light, a cone of light, and so that is arresting the spotlight, instead of making it go forever. It all comes from these very first impressions.

DE: But you did have a reaction against the plug-in and the electronics.

AB: I was always fascinated with the inside of things – printed circuits, electronic instruments that you could see the insides of, even watches. The mechanisms of them were just so beautiful, visually stunning, so I always found that inspiring. But I prefer to make an artwork that is not dependent on electricity or electronic engineers. I don't need the headaches. If I need to collaborate, I collaborate. I've known many artists – I'm one of them – whose collaborations began on a 50/50 basis, say artist/engineer, but ended with disagreements over artistic input. It doesn't work if both think they are artists. Jeff Koons, [Antony] Gormley, they have studio assistants but that is not collaboration.

DE: You need a facilitator perhaps, like sculptors in the past have needed fabricators.

AB: Frankly, what I don't like about the work of some of the big-name sculptors is that it is fabricated, it is manufactured, it has become an industry. I like the hands-on. I like to be in control. Hands-on means that you put your personality into the work. When someone else does it ... When Henry Moore carved his own work, it was different from the work carved by his assistants.

DE: That positions you in a particular way. For some artists the hands-on is intrinsic, and for others it is irrelevant.

AB: Robert Klippel did everything with his hands.

DE: Yes, he was completely hands-on. He only scaled up his work by hand. He did once become involved in a series of fabricated works, but he thought them a failure and later tried to buy every one back. Well, *Sculptron* did not sell when you exhibited it. It would have been a challenge for many people at the time. I think it was seen as vanguard art here.

AB: It was what we needed to do. We were waiting for a commission. This was a model, you know. We brought an idea to life.

DE: Did it bring you into contact with other like-minded artists? Mike Kitching in Sydney, for example, was becoming very interested in 'plug-in' work at this time, not interactive though. And Ken Reinhard, coming through the pop tradition, was starting to incorporate kineticism and light into his three-dimensional forms. And then you have Ostoja-Kotkowski from Adelaide. By the late 60s Frank Hinder also started to produce some beautiful luminal three-dimensional works and light boxes – a traditional artist who translated that sensibility into such works. Were those artists suddenly keen to get to know you? Did you establish a position within a particular form of art?

AB: No, we didn't connect at all. I think Ostoja was completely focused on himself and he didn't make any attempt whatsoever. Mike Kitching showed in the Blake Prize that I won. He had a piece there as well and I thought his piece was really interesting because it was a safe door. It was really big, and it looked amazing, and he used material that looked like beaten-up aluminium, but very crafted. What the spiritual significance was of that, I don't know. I hear about him. He is living on one of those islands in Pittwater, but he has disappeared off the radar, scaring people with his presence apparently.

DE: I think he was a wild guy at the beginning.

AB: He had this fantastic-looking girl, who is still his wife, I think, and she was the opposite. But I never saw the wild side of him.

DE: There was a hiatus, wasn't there, for you, between *Sculptron* and then creating works which used light to create an environment, like *Explanandum* or *Invisible* or the 2002 *Infinity towers*? Did you just move into other areas after *Sculptron* and then decide to come back into light/the luminal in the later 'environments'? What was your attitude to light and to 'art and technology' after *Sculptron*?

AB: After *Sculptron* and 'art and technology', I realised that if I am to pursue this area I need to be connected to scientists and engineers, and that experience was a little bit daunting to say the least, and really I just wanted my creative freedom, and so I continued with my paintings and made very large paintings which became installations.

DE: The 1979 *Infinity* installation at Realities gallery in Melbourne. Were there luminal elements in that?

AB: Yes, very many elements. The whole thing was luminal. What I did there [with Realities] with John Comeadow, I took the space and I darkened it completely. I said to Marianne [Baillieu], 'Leave me, let me have the space, come back when it's finished', and she trusted me. Then we blocked out all of the daylight. John Comeadow got theatre lights, we rigged them up so that we illuminated the works – all the paintings were large – and we lit the paintings from edge to edge, just the paintings, just with the spots in the ceiling. So the light emanated from the work themselves. The works looked luminous.

If you walk into a gallery, ideally this is how you should see paintings, because you walk into a gallery and you see the paintings in one light. You don't have daylight because daylight comes and goes. In my view the combination of daylight and artificial light doesn't work. You have to control the light in a gallery. Home is a different story, the painting lives in a different way. So I had the luxury of lighting the paintings exactly how I wanted them. The art dealer let me do it, and it was fantastic. The paintings were the light source. There was music as well which I did at the time. The atmosphere was fantastic. Later the photographer Bill Henson had a show in the gallery here [at the National Gallery of Victoria] and he had the

same thing, a very dark space with works lit from edge to edge. It was wonderful. To some people, it was theatrical. Give me a break! You go to a lot of trouble and they accuse you of being theatrical!? I am just lighting the painting in the best possible way. It's nothing to do with theatre.

DE: Does it also have to do with a very strong connection between light and colour for you? You want your colour to be infused with light?

AB: I just wanted to light the paintings in the best possible way and get the paintings to come to life. Because the room was dark and just the paintings were lit, it created a wonderful feeling of being in a void with the paintings becoming windows. When I had a drawing show at Charles Nodrum Gallery I did the same thing; the room was blackened and the paintings and drawings lit so they looked like windows into the cosmos.

I have a series of five paintings that are completely dependent on light – my *Infinity* paintings. There is a black, green, gold, white and red one. They are big. Just one small spotlight shining into the centre of the painting is all it takes to make the painting kinetic. As you walk past the painting, the light travels with you. This happens because the painting is painted with grooves

DE: A little like the principles of op art, perhaps?

AB: It's nothing to do with op art. The idea of light, other than the idea of plug-in – well, these are plug-in as well. These paintings are about the light and the paintings. Of course you can see the painting without light, but these are designed with the idea of one light. It is uncanny. I developed this technique. The way I developed it is that I moved the brushstrokes in circles. See the grooves? [He gestures to a work.] Like a record, so when you move the light goes with you. These paintings are much deeper and they are layered, so you get depth as well. These big paintings are 16 foot long and they are all like that. As you move across the painting, the painting moves with you. It is fantastic.

DE: Is there any metaphysical quality about that for you? What is your aim with the experience?

AB: Light moves. Time moves. We move with both. 'Wow!'

DE: So light is a facilitator of the temporal in your work.

AB: The light from the sun takes eight minutes to reach the Earth. Light and time are connected. What gives life to a painting is the light that emanates from it, not simply from the light source that illuminates it.

DE: With a work like *Invisible*, light is patterns of light and shadow. The material cascades down and its interaction with light creates patterns.

AB: It was amazing. When I was working with this material, I was holding a piece in my hand, it is clear and the light was shining through it and reflecting on the white surface, and I realised that I was holding a lens in my hand, and I thought: goodness, this is fantastic, I can use this clear material – the material I normally put pigment into to turn into paint – I can use it as a lens and the light shining through it gives me wonderful patterns and shadows; it reflects this material and transforms it into lines or shadows on the wall. It was so basic. Then the work becomes another thing.

DE: The concept of transformation, or the process of it, seems to be intrinsic to your oeuvre.

AB: It makes the work come to life. It gives it purpose and sense. It is nothing without it and everything with it. And conceived as one.

DE: What about light installations like *Escape* of 1992, the Melbourne Festival work using ultraviolet light?

AB: *Escape* was creating a kind of landscape, very much a total environment, an environment that you could immerse yourself in, be part of it. It was incredible, the effect it had on people.

DE: We should say that *Escape* was an installation where you filled the room with shredded paper.

AB: They were off-cuts of little pieces of paper. Basically it was a huge envelope machine that was making envelopes and when you make those there are little triangular corners, of all sizes, though all small, which are cut. The biggest would be two to three centimetres long. And I collected them for about a year – about 16 tonnes of it – we are talking industrial scale. I saw the machine in the factory, and it was about 20 metres long and it was making hundreds of envelopes every minute, so there was an enormous amount of this chopped-up paper. It looked pristine like snow – back to your childhood, pure and light – and so I collected tonnes of it, in bags, and thought: I will paint some of it in fluorescent colours. And so we just sprayed fluorescent paint into the bags – the surface area would have been kilometres long – so some of it was painted, but a lot remained white. Then we surrounded this gallery with as much ultraviolet light as we could hire, which was a huge amount really, and when we lit this enormous area, full of 16 tonnes of paper, way above your head, with towers you could build and caves, and when we lit it, it looked like opal fields because of the fluorescent light in this sea of white. It was like a landscape from another planet. We had hidden speakers in surround sound which played electronic music.

DE: Were you an admirer of John Cage?

AB: Oh, yes, I found his work interesting because he was working with new ideas, but it takes a lot to excite me in minimal art or music.

DE: Did you go to New York in the 60s or 70s?

AB: Yes, I went in the 70s but mainly for family reasons. I just need to say a little more about *Escape*. The music was originally composed for my installation *Amaze* but it was perfect for *Escape*. I had worked with the musician Duncan McGuire on the Fairlight synthesiser, which was the most sophisticated electronic music sampler of its time. It features in anthologies of electronic music and Duncan was one of its earliest users. People had to remove their shoes and enter *Escape* through a darkened corridor to adjust the retina. The effect on people was absolutely amazing. There were queues right around the block. All sorts of people came, even some busloads of disabled children, whose minders told me that what they could achieve in three months, I achieved in one visit. These children were experiencing freedom and joy.

DE: That's the kind of installation that you can't really get the full effect of until you do it.

AB: Yes, we didn't know what would happen. What did happen was quite amazing. We just wanted to give people the freedom to be themselves. In ten days we had around 8000 people see it. We knew that on the basis of how many tickets we issued. They came and they threw the paper in the air like snow, you could roll in it. When Richard Wherrett, the director of the festival, came – I had suggested the idea to him – I just filled the studio up with paper to see if it was going to work myself, and I got the UV lights, and asked him to

come over and see what he thought. And he walked into the studio, and immediately threw himself on it and said, 'You're on'. So we had a year to prepare it, to collect the material, and we did it. But what we didn't know was how the kids were going to throw the paper in the air continuously – and what happens to paper, when it rubs against itself, it disintegrates, it turns into dust – and all of a sudden, with 50 to 100 people throwing paper in the room, there was dust. So it became a problem, we had to issue people with masks, but in the end the paper disintegrated. So we let people do what they wanted. We had volunteer minders. It was incredible. People had the stuff in their hair, they found it in planes, in the street, in cemeteries. That was light, UV light. It was a landscape in itself.

DE: The idea that art will be cathartic in some way?

AB: *Escape* certainly seemed to be. Perhaps it is the immersive experience of such installations.

DE: Light is basically the agent that transforms the environment. That is the mode in which you are working.

AB: I try to achieve this but it is difficult. I saw a work by Anish Kapoor inside a church in Venice, at the biennale, where he installed a mechanism that was to produce a kind of smoke and light in front of the altar. At first the church was closed because the mechanism was not working, but eventually technicians managed to fire up about 60 percent of the smoke and light, and we were allowed in and could get a little of the gist of it. The idea was to create that religious experience, that shaft of light – as the Egyptians did – that has been in play as long as human consciousness has been. The physical experience of light. But again, the idea was hampered by the technology.

Basically I know that I want my painting to live, to emanate something that makes you feel it is alive. That's the challenge. My five *Infinity* paintings provide the kinetic experience, the light moves with you, you are motivating it by moving from side to side. I have the paintings here. If you tell me when you are coming next time, I will put one of the paintings up on the wall. I would love you to see it.

DE: I am very grateful. Given that, I think we will finish on that note for now.

[End]