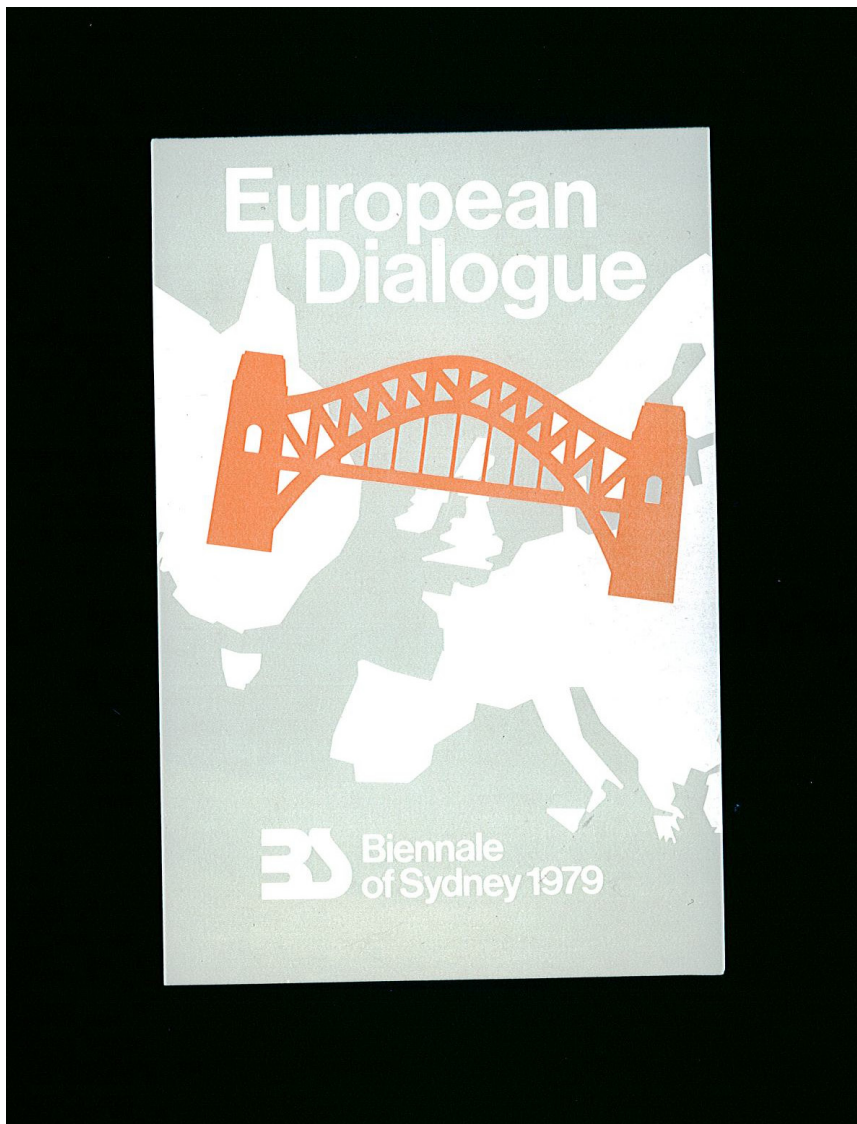


# The Third Biennale of Sydney: 'White Elephant or Red Herring?'

Anthony Gardner and Charles Green



Exhibition catalogue cover, Biennale of Sydney, *European Dialogue: The Third Biennale of Sydney 1979*.

Courtesy Biennale of Sydney

The focus of this essay is the indisputably important 1979 Biennale of Sydney, which launched Sydney's biennial as an international event seeking out adventurous art from Western Europe and the USA. We will argue that it sought both to present an image of the world of contemporary art and also, more critically, to embody a key strand of the globalising art world's emerging contemporaneity.

By the end of the 1970s, the arrival of relatively affordable international flights had pushed Australian artists, along with their peers from other 'margins' of contemporary art, into closer contact with North Atlantic art centres. The result was the beginning of a Balkanisation of art worlds beyond New York and Western Europe: within each art centre, a division into two overlapping art worlds, a provincial ghetto represented by one set of commercial art galleries or an international art world enclave represented by another, usually smaller and more exclusive, number of galleries and, increasingly, some artist-run spaces.<sup>1</sup>

This was as true in Tokyo as it was in Sydney or Melbourne. The two art worlds overlapped but the latter world—that which saw itself as international and part of a nascent, globalised art world—did not at that time or later necessarily renew itself from the former's talent-pool of the best and brightest, and then only reluctantly or in such a way as to reinforce North Atlantic primacy over the image of what was contemporary art. Many scholars' recent work, particularly that of John Clark, has shown that this remained true even of the huge Asian biennials that flourished from the 1990s onwards though, increasingly, many younger artists moved easily from international artist residency to residency and from biennial to biennial.<sup>2</sup>

## Founding the Sydney Biennale

Both the São Paulo and Sydney Biennales were founded by immigrants from post-War Europe—in São Paulo, Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho; in Sydney, Franco Belgiorno-Nettis. Their motivations were similar, and they had been

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1 Nothing in our description of the cultural geography of the art world implies a judgement about the quality of any artist's work and should not be taken as doing so. We are grateful to the Biennale of Sydney for providing us with access to the limited quantity of its exhibition and image archives that is accessible; we mention web-sites below to signpost art history's newly accessible digital archive as opposed to its fragile existence as transcripts or pamphlets in archives; we are particularly grateful to the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and its extraordinarily resourceful image library archivist, Eric Riddler, for providing us with access to AGNSW's Biennale of Sydney image files; these document in great detail the Biennales of Sydney from 1976 onwards; we also acknowledge access to exhibition files in the AGNSW Library as well as the Terry Smith ephemera files in the Schaeffer Fine Arts Library, Power Institute, University of Sydney.

2 For Asian art and biennials, see Clark, J. forthcoming, *Biennales and Contemporary Asian Art: Histories of the Asian 'New'*, courtesy of the author; see also Clark, J. 2010, 'Biennales as Structures for the Writing of Art History: The Asian Perspective,' in E. Filipovic, M. van Hal and S. Øvstebo (eds), *The Biennial Reader*, Bergen, Bergen Kunsthall, pp. 164–183.

affected by their own experiences of post-World War II diaspora. They were European migrants who established themselves as important industrialists, proudly participating in their chosen city's civic and national desires for international recognition as nascent global cities and as nodes of business and capital in their respective regions in the Southern Hemisphere. Needless to say, civic and national aspirations were never identical nor necessarily in harmony, nor was the balance between the two always equal. Whereas the Federal Government's new Australia Council for the Arts wished primarily to support art-making nationwide and far less to project Australian art internationally. Its aim was to maximise direct support to Australian artists in the form of grants. Belgiorno-Nettis, on the other hand, wanted to replicate and import the cultural institutions of his homeland to his beloved Sydney, and in particular the venerable institution of the Biennale of Venice:

My love affair with Venice, where I have been a frequent visitor for years, is the source of inspiration for the Biennale. How do you break the isolation of Australia, which I felt strongly myself in the early 50s? How do you inject that flavor of international extravaganza, originality and explosive vision that you see at gatherings in Venice, in the Giardini, in the Corderia, in the Arsenale, with their centuries of tradition?<sup>3</sup>

Other biennial models than that of Venice were already available, principally the idea of a biennial of the South, current from 1955 onwards, that we have written about elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> These ideas might just as easily have been adopted, but there is no evidence that they were discussed and Belgiorno-Nettis's civic-minded boosterism, nostalgia and philanthropy prevailed. He invented, underpinned and financially supported the new biennial with the organisational and curatorial resources provided by his family conglomerate, the powerful Transfield Corporation, which built bridges, railways and major infrastructure projects. Belgiorno-Nettis moved beyond his previous sponsorship of a major national competition of contemporary art, the Transfield Prize, which he had started in 1961. But an art prize exhibition was a model focused on paintings or sculptures, and this model was on the wane by the early 1970s.

The first, humble 1973 Biennale of Sydney, largely organised and staffed by Transfield, was a simple survey exhibition, not much more than part of the opening celebrations at the spectacular, new, Jørn Utzon-designed Sydney Opera

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3 Belgiorno-Nettis, F. 2002, in P. Latos-Valier, *Biennale of Sydney 2002: 1973–1998*, Sydney, Biennale of Sydney, see [http://esvc000946.wic004u.server-web.com/Biennale2002/bos\\_history.asp#4](http://esvc000946.wic004u.server-web.com/Biennale2002/bos_history.asp#4) (viewed 14 April 2010).

4 See Gardner, A. and Green, C. 2012, 'When Art Migrates: Biennales and Itinerancy', in J. Steyn and N. Stamselberg (eds), *Cross-Cultural Identities: Art, Migrants and the Metaphor of Waste*, London, IB Tauris; see also Gardner, A. and Green, C. 2013, in press, 'Cultural Translation or Cultural Exclusion? Contemporary Art, the South and Biennale Exhibitions', in C. Bydler and C. Sjöholm (eds), *Regionality / Mondiality: Perspectives on Art, Aesthetics and Globalization*, Stockholm, Södertörn University Press.

House, which incorporated a small exhibition gallery. Most of the artists were Australian and the selection was insular and conservative, especially considering the number of local exhibitions and artists already working in conceptualist or new, post-object forms and the exhibitions of relatively recent international art that had already been seen in Australia. Instead, a much larger and far more innovative exhibition, *Recent Australian Art 1973*, a Biennale satellite event held simultaneously in the newly upgraded Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney's state art museum, presented those new forms—installation, performance, film and video—to the Sydney public. Some of the Australian artists working in the new art forms had already established international connections through survey exhibitions or biennials. For instance, minimalist Robert Hunter represented Australia in the 1970 Triennale-India of 'contemporary world art' in New Delhi, India with austere, stenciled wall drawings. There, Hunter met Carl Andre, with whom he became good friends and who facilitated Hunter's participation in other international exhibitions. At that Triennial, Robert Ryman, Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt had represented the US; Waldo Rasmussen, Executive Director of Circulating Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, had curated their national representation. Rasmussen had long been instrumental in sending mega-exhibitions of American art to far-flung global destinations. In 1967, he had organised an enormous and influential exhibition of post-War New York School painting, *Two Decades of American Painting*, for the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. It had toured to Kyoto, in Japan, to New Delhi, and finally to Melbourne and Sydney.<sup>5</sup>

The Biennale of Sydney had been founded in 1973 with the mission of engaging two separate groups—on the one hand, local artists, students and intellectuals; on the other, the general public—with the latest forms of contemporary art. But it was now faced with the contradictions inherent in taking on that self-appointed mission in a relatively small art centre. For its founders, the Biennale initially appeared to be Australia's lifeline to the outside art world. Even at that time, for many artists, it was simply one forum amongst many. For some—even in 1979 for the local artists who were most likely to be invited into these biennials—Australia, like other 'marginal' centres like Brazil or Argentina, possessed a more complex and cosmopolitan art scene than simply that of a collection of small, parochial, provincial cities. These cities' own art scenes had already been enmeshed for a decade or more in the very real 1970s globalisation of contemporary art—or at least conceptualist art—which had from the start flourished beyond New York or London in several far-flung cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Vancouver, Sydney and Melbourne but which was not on display in the 1973 Biennale of Sydney. For visiting artists and curators, all of these cities boasted respectable venues for avant-garde art as

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<sup>5</sup> See Green, C. and Barker, H. 2011, 'The Watershed: *Two Decades of American Painting* at the National Gallery of Victoria', *Art Bulletin of the National Gallery of Victoria*, no. 50, pp. 64–77, 4, notes.

it touched down by mail delivery or in curators' suitcases. Lucy Lippard easily transported to Seattle her major conceptualist survey, *557,087*, titled after the population of Seattle at the time; her exhibition included John Baldessari, Eva Hesse, Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Sol LeWitt, Daniel Buren, Walter De Maria, and Adrian Piper.<sup>6</sup> In 1969, Joseph Kosuth had commissioned adventurous Melbourne gallerist and patron, Bruce Pollard, to place advertisements in Melbourne newspapers as part of his work, *The Second Investigation, 1969*, coinciding with similar appearances in London and New York papers. Pollard paid for the advertisements (even though one newspaper, Melbourne's weekly tabloid, the trashy *Truth*, refused to accept them, on the grounds that they were so mysterious that they might somehow be subversive), enabling Kosuth to create a work by remote control at long distance.<sup>7</sup>

The next Sydney Biennale, in 1976, saw the synthesis of two different models of support: the Biennale received an even greater, and now dominant, portion of its sponsorship through the recently-created national government arts funding organisation, the Australia Council (which had been established by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1973, the same year that Belgiorino-Nettis established the Biennale of Sydney), and less from the continuing but smaller support of private donors, of whom Transfield was by far the largest. With the clout provided by its substantial funding, the Australia Council steered the Biennale into a new, mega-exhibition structure. This time, though, instead of participating directly in artist selection as it had in 1973, the Council delegated the task to a director who it knew would seek out new types of art. In effect, this was an early phase in the evolution of a preference for what only partly in jest became known as 'biennial art.' The Sydney Biennale was to be governed by a powerful, quasi-autonomous Board, curated by a Director whose position was independent of host venues. This time and henceforth, it would be exhibited in the city's largest and most venerable art museum, the recently refurbished Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), offering the Biennale temporary access to the museum-quality, climate-controlled spaces and experienced technical staff that an exhibition needed if it were to include international loans. Without doubt, the cosmopolitan, internationalist members of the Australia Council's Visual Arts Board, led by Leon Paroissien (who was later to direct the 1984 Sydney Biennale and then become inaugural Director of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art) wished to set in course a new format: the carefully orchestrated narrative of centre-periphery relations and artist choices that would draw supportive international responses and an interest in Australia. However, it would also create negative, frustrated Australian criticism. The

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6 Lippard, L., Butler, C., Plagens, P. and Pollock, G., 2012, *From Conceptualism to Feminism: Lucy Lippard's Numbers Shows 1969-74*, London, Afterall Books.

7 See Chapter 1 of Green, C., 2001, *The Third Hand: Artist Collaborations from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Biennale's organisers had taken careful account of the initiative of one of their close friends, Sydney-based collector and philanthropist John Kaldor's series of Art Projects. Kaldor's invitations to artists to realise a major artistic project in Sydney had begun with Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast—One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia*, 1969. He followed this with an invitation to auteur curator Harald Szeemann to assemble a survey exhibition of contemporary Australian art during a lightning-fast visit in 1971 (this did not result in the inclusion of any Australian artists in *documenta 5*, however), and then to Gilbert & George to present their *Singing Sculpture* in 1973. Veteran curator Daniel Thomas remembered that the grandeur of *Wrapped Coast* shifted contemporary art sympathetically into the minds of Australians and, just as important, suggested to a new generation of local artists that they were not isolated. Thomas, then an adventurous young curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, wrote the key, cosmopolitan catalogue essay for the first Sydney Biennale; it was to be his vision of the 1979 Biennale that eventually prevailed over others. *Wrapped Coast's* supporters, who included Belgiorno-Nettis, were also, later, Board members of the Biennale of Sydney. Kaldor had demonstrated two things: that there was considerable public interest in contemporary art that moved outside the boundaries of paintings on art museum walls; and that the international art world's attention could be focused on a distant event given the right, adventurous programming. To achieve this double ambition, in 1975 the Sydney Biennale Board poached maverick curator Tom McCullough from his position as director of the Mildura Sculpturscape—a dramatically successful, spectacular triennial survey in a distant, small city in arid inland Australia—to direct the 1976 Biennale of Sydney.<sup>8</sup> Despite Mildura's huge distance from anywhere—it is nominally located between the three major population centres of Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne, but only in the sense that Santa Fe is between New York and Los Angeles—McCullough had established Mildura as the key exhibition of advanced art in Australia through an astute combination of insider word-of-mouth, inveterate travel, sheer energy, a close-knit group of artist advisers who talent-spotted for him, and a core group of dedicated assistants. His 1976 Biennale of Sydney, *Recent International Forms in Art*, was curated according to a capacious theme rather than a national typology and, further, it largely focused its rhetoric, though not in fact any genuine critical focus, on artists from Pacific Rim nations. This was dictated as much by the small budget for the inventive curator's travel as by his ambition; biennial artist selection was, and often remains, opportunistic and dictated by the limitations of time and money, even if the results might be sometimes revelatory. McCullough recalled that,

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8 For a detailed and illuminating account see Sanders, A. 2010, 'The Mildura Sculpture Triennials 1961–1978: An Interpretive History', Canberra, The Australian National University (PhD thesis).

Artists who were extending three-dimensional ideas beyond the pedestal into installations, earth-works and performance art were regularly showing in Mildura by the 1975 Triennial, and I consulted them on new concepts, contacts and ideas for the upcoming Biennale. In 1976 I visited only two countries while preparing for the Biennale, as we didn't have much money. I was only allowed two weeks overseas so I decided to focus on a Pacific triangle.<sup>9</sup>

More recent directors of biennials have become famous for their itinerant nomadism, but McCullough relied on a small group of advisers from each region, including veteran expatriate curator John Stringer, based in New York, and Tommaso Trini, from the Italian art magazine, *Data*, to select the inclusions.<sup>10</sup> Such curatorial delegation was also common in later biennials. The exhibition catalogue was equally frugal: the cheapest, one-colour printing on the cardboard cover, spiral-bound, brown paper pages, and dull monochrome illustrations. It looked like a down-market instruction manual. The conceptualist look was partly deliberate, not unmodish (it very consciously recalled the appearance of Szeemann's *documenta 5* (1972) catalogue) and partly unavoidable, but the austere publication was, as with the absence of curatorial travel, a contrast with the future direction of biennials. At the time, to 1976 director Tom McCullough, the poor publication seemed adequate, looked appropriately austere and saved a lot of scant money.

## White Elephant or Red Herring?: The 1979 Biennale of Sydney

The Third Biennale of Sydney in 1979 preserved the innovations of 1976, in particular the notion of a biennial shaped by a director, and it was in reality the first Sydney Biennale to grab any degree of international attention. At the same time, its audience numbers—almost exclusively local—also grew considerably. Both successes were the result of considerable calculation; the double-guessing was typical of this phase of regional biennials everywhere, and followed a series of symposia, meetings and public consultations that began at the conclusion of the 1976 Biennale and continued over the next year or so, in part as a way of road-testing the way forward, in part as an opportunity to audition the shortlist of prospective directors for 1979, in part in conformity to the 1970s penchant for consultation and collective processes and consensus, even if (as turned out) this was window-dressing. Englishman Nick Waterlow was one of those who presented a proposal for the next Biennale at a public meeting at Paddington

<sup>9</sup> McCullough, T. 2002, interview in Latos-Valier, *Biennale of Sydney 2002: 1973–1998* (viewed 14 April 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Conversation with John Stringer, Perth, March 2004. Green's notes.

Town Hall, in inner city Sydney. A candidate for the Biennale directorship, he gave the impression that his Biennale would involve a substantial amount of community consultation and local artist selection:

The role of the Biennale coordinator and back-up staff should be to work very closely with a liaison group representing the various interests, including artists, performers, gallery people, industry, state, etc., government, community groups, students and sponsors. This would need to be carefully administered, but it is important the coordinator is in a real position to respond to ideas and suggestions and to ensure they are implemented where feasible. Unlike Venice or Sao Paulo, this could then make for a Creative Peoples Biennale while maintaining a high level of production, activity, ingenuity and dissemination—in other words a highly unique Sydney Biennale. The Biennale will succeed if it exists at three levels—community, national and international.<sup>11</sup>

In effect, Waterlow wanted to create a Biennale that would be a popular exhibition for a regional public as well as the expression of local artists groups' wishes for a fuller representation of Australians and women artists. It was to be a dialogue with living artists.<sup>12</sup> This intention was potentially far more exclusive and expensive than local art activists realised at that moment.

Waterlow had curated no major exhibitions before his appointment as Artistic Director of the Third Sydney Biennale. He had been resident in Australia for a period in the 1960s, had moved back to London, where he worked with community arts organisations and their art spaces in Milton Keynes, a new, post-War project city outside London, before returning to Australia to teach curatorial studies in Paddington at one of Sydney's three major art schools (a position he was to hold until his death). His directorship of the Biennale was accompanied by an often-intense hostility felt by many local artists towards the Biennale's organisation and its directorship. The surprisingly cursory inclusion of Australian artists in McCullough's previous Biennale, given his almost unique rapport with adventurous local artists, who he had closely consulted whilst at the same time steering his own course through the minefield of artist selection, had resulted in vocal public claims of an international bias against Australian artists. It slowly became evident, as Waterlow's selections and Biennale press releases gradually became public, that the under-representation of women had continued. As Biennale Director, Waterlow was soon negotiating a maze of

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11 Nick Waterlow presentation at Paddington Town Hall, Sydney, 21 July 1977, quoted in Binns, V., Milliss, I. and The Women's Art Group, 1979, *Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring. Comments from the Art Community 1979*, Sydney, Union Media Services, p. 2; this essay is reprinted in *Ian Milliss Retrospective Documents*, Sydney, Millis, I. 2010, see <http://www.ianmilliss.com/documents/historyherstory.htm> (viewed 14 April 2010).

12 Conversation with Nick Waterlow, Sydney, May 2000. Green's notes.



meetings and angry letters. Two groups of well-organised, vocal Sydney and Melbourne artists and critics threatened an artist boycott if demands for a 50 per cent representation of women, and a substantial representation of local artists and community arts were not met.<sup>13</sup> The artist groups convened public meetings, lobbied funding bodies and frenetically agitated amongst and often against their interstate peers, publishing an illustrated, book-length manifesto against the biennial, *Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring. Comments from the Art Community 1979*.<sup>14</sup> This strongly resembled earlier Art & Language publications, which was no surprise since a key member of the New York chapter of Art & Language, Ian Burn, had returned to Australia a few years before and created a publishing collective with other artist-activists including Ian Milliss. Burn and Milliss contributed an essay, 'Don't moan, organise! (with apologies to Joe Hill)', writing, 'Events like the Sydney Biennale can be foisted off onto the art community in ways which poorly reflect our interests or needs. Because artists are powerless, structures like that of the Biennale, which assume to define the situation in which we all work, can be imposed on us'.<sup>15</sup> They wrote to Waterlow, 'We cannot stress too strongly our concern that while a major international exhibition is to be held in Sydney, Australian artists are to appear in an ancillary, complementary way to an exhibition that should be highlighting and not downgrading their talents.'<sup>16</sup> The activist groups felt that the significant amount of public money spent—by Australian standards the biennial was a lavish event—underscored the lack of an Australian version of a Whitney Biennial, a national survey of artists. The Biennale Board disingenuously agreed. In a prompt reply to the Melbourne artist group, Franco Belgiorno-Nettis urged the group to lobby for an Australian biennial that, he suggested, might be held in Australia's other large city and artistic hub, Melbourne, in alternate years to the Sydney Biennale.<sup>17</sup> In the end, after discussions, remonstrances and reassurance, of the 62 individual artists that the activists counted, there were only 19 Australians. Of the 19 Australians, only five were women. There were only five women amongst the international artists. In all, as the Sydney activists angrily noted, there were only ten women included in the list of 62 artists they had from the Biennale Board. The focus was now firmly on ephemeral and relatively easily transported or assembled new art forms: on performances and installations rather than paintings. Significantly, the Australian representation included artists from regional and rural locations including, for the first time

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13 Binns et al., *Sydney Biennale*, p. 7.

14 Binns et al., *Sydney Biennale*.

15 Burn, I. and Milliss, I., 'Don't moan, organise! (with apologies to Joe Hill)', in Binns et al., *Sydney Biennale*, p. 10.

16 J. Burke, J. Davis, L. Dumbrell, R. Jacks, P. Kennedy, R. Lindsay, J. Nixon and J. Watson, letter to Nick Waterlow, 11 September 1977, quoted in Binns et al., *Sydney Biennale*, p. 6; this letter was from the group of Melbourne-based artists and writers.

17 F. Belgiorno-Nettis, letter to Janine Burke, John Davis, Lesley Dumbrell, Robert Jacks, Peter Kennedy, Robert Lindsay, John Nixon and Jenny Watson, 26 September 1977, quoted in Binns et al., *Sydney Biennale*, p. 6.

in a major survey exhibition of contemporary art, paintings by Aboriginal artists from north-east Arnhem Land, in Australia's distant 'Top End'. The Biennale's vain struggle to mediate between local and international spheres was almost invisible to the audiences who arrived at the exhibition itself. They saw a continuum of messy, body-based contemporary art, of Marina Abramović and Ulay's collaborative action, *The Brink* (1979), in the company of Mike Parr's installation that incorporated performance documentation and photographs involving his whole extended family. Parr's own, widely read commentary on the exhibition, 'Parallel Fictions', appeared in the country's leading art magazine, *Art and Australia*. He focused on the emergence of a new, global language of post-studio contemporary art rather than on the statistics of artists' inclusions and exclusions.<sup>18</sup> The exhibition catalogue that accompanied the 1979 Biennale was not nearly as spartan as that of 1976, since biennial curators and artists alike were coming to feel that biennials deserved commemorating and that artists deserved better representation.

Waterlow pointedly titled his biennial *European Dialogue*, including no American artists and focusing on Europe. He was introducing Australians to a messier, more political, definitively post-1960s Europe, rather than the neat Parisian modernism and *tachist* abstractions of post-war French painting, a large exhibition of which had toured Australia in 1953. Exhibitions of recent American painting had, by now, toured Australia in 1958, 1964 and, most memorably, in 1967, courtesy of the remarkable Circulating Exhibitions Program of the quasi-autonomous International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibitions included *Two Decades of American Painting* (1967), *Some Recent American Art* (1974), and *Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse* (1975). *Some Recent American Art* focused on American minimalist and conceptualist sculptures and installations. Despite the relative contemporaneity of the latter exhibition, it was time, felt Waterlow, to shift attention away from America for several compelling reasons. *European Dialogue* recycled Harald Szeemann's curatorial theme from the 1972 *documenta 5* of 'individual mythologies'. But both this biennial and the large survey shows now appearing in Europe, such as the 1980 Venice Biennale, the 1981 London Royal Academy survey, *A New Spirit in Painting*, and the 1982 Berlin mega-exhibition, *Zeitgeist*, all excluded the outsider artists and the atlases of objects culled from mass culture that the maverick Swiss curator had included in *documenta 5*, and *European Dialogue* was no different. Szeemann's capacious, catch-all, curatorial label, 'individual mythologies', was now beginning to be repackaged, especially in Europe, as a new direction in painting—as hyper-expressive, allegorical paintings that were about to be labeled neo-expressionist or transavantgarde—in large survey exhibitions around the world. This label occluded the degree to which the new painting had grown out of the second

18 Parr, M. 1979, 'Parallel Fictions: The Third Biennale of Sydney, 1979', *Art and Australia*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 172–183.

generation of conceptualist art, beginning to appear in Szeemann's *documenta* 5, and much of which was now shown in Sydney in 1979. There was relatively little of the so-called new painting in the 1979 Biennale, apart from the scrawled symbols of German artist A.R. Penck, but much diaristic, semi-fictional and narrative photo-documentation and, of course, the Australian Aboriginal paintings. But Waterlow did include several of the European transavantgarde's putative grandfather figures, including School of London survivor Howard Hodgkin, and German painter Gerhard Richter, active since the mid-1950s and already claimed by many art movements as a precursor. Waterlow remembered,

The concept and themes of the 1979 exhibition evolved from the range of new work that was coming out of Europe, that hadn't been seen in Australia, which I knew about before moving to Australia in 1977. There had also been a couple of major American exhibitions here so there existed more of a need to show the European avant-garde in relation to Australia. The exhibition did bring a lot of postobject work that hadn't been seen before as well as artists like Marcel Broodthaers, Gerhard Richter, Hanne Darboven, Mario Merz, A. R. Penck, Valie Export, Daniel Buren and Armand Arman. There was also some terrific performance work from Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Jurgen Klauke, Ulrike Rosenbach and others.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of a 'European dialogue' reflected more than the conceit of a surfeit of American art; in his catalogue essay, Waterlow was reflecting the widespread doubt that New York remained the centre of the international contemporary art world for this was the period of the deepest Cold War, a phase in which American economic and political power was in decline. Jimmy Carter's presidency and the Iranian Revolution were the backdrop to the 1979 Biennale, and a few months later the Iran Hostage Crisis unfolded. This was a period of pervasive anti-Americanism in the largely left-leaning worlds of both European and Australian contemporary art. Waterlow referred in his catalogue essay and in later recollections to the sequence of American exhibitions that had arrived in Sydney, Melbourne and other cities around the world and to his sense that a shift had occurred that Australia should take account of.<sup>20</sup> He wrote, 'The most persuasive argument in favour of a European Dialogue is that it does at this time represent a genuine shift in creative emphasis. It is now accepted that remarkable work is likely to arise in Cracow [sic], Turin, Düsseldorf, Vienna, Paris, London or Amsterdam as in New York'.<sup>21</sup> He was, in effect, attempting to revise art history much as many of his Sydney and Melbourne critics would

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19 Waterlow, N. 2002, interview in Latos-Valier, *Biennale of Sydney 2002:1973–1998* (viewed 14 April 2010).

20 Conversation with Nick Waterlow, Sydney, May 2000, Green's notes.

21 Nick Waterlow, 1979, 'European Dialogue', catalogue essay, *European Dialogue: The Third Biennale of Sydney*, curated Nick Waterlow, Sydney, Biennale of Sydney, 1979, not paginated.

have liked, albeit stripped of their own Marxism and, more surprisingly, his own, egalitarian, community arts, non-curatorial background. After a couple of decades of intense American influence upon Australian art, he wished to revalue the direct links between Europe and Australia and the influence of European art on Australian art.<sup>22</sup> This was evident in the show's installation rather than in its catalogue, for its essays were cursory and under-theorised, compared with those of the 1988 Sydney Biennale, which he was also to curate, a mere decade later. Waterlow's own, well-intentioned but very hasty 1979 essay was no exception, and his claims about the overweening shadow of American art were not completely true, nor did a turn from the US to Europe exactly capture the wave of the future or correctly encapsulate the recent past. An important solo exhibition of art by Marcel Duchamp, the grandfather of conceptualism, had toured Australia's art museums in 1967–68; this had been initiated in New Zealand. Australian expatriate conceptual artists such as Ian Burn had long argued that a wider and more inclusive perspective should inflect the understanding of influence. And for Nick Waterlow's 1988 Biennale of Sydney, ex-Art & Language leader Ian Burn (who had been one of the ringleaders of the agitation against Waterlow in the lead-up to the 1979 Biennale), contributed a major revisionist essay to the exhibition's book setting out a different and highly significant framework—different both to MoMA's and Harald Szeemann's atlases of international art—for imagining Australian art's participation in a global history of art, and thus that of any so-called peripheral art centre.<sup>23</sup>

By the late 1970s, Sydney's art world seemed to have reached a respectable if small critical mass in terms of self-sustaining size. The 1979 Biennale, in effect, began the process of self-consciously garnering to itself the role of international gatekeeper, a process initiated by its important predecessor of 1976. This intention—as much as showing a regional audience a smaller simulacrum of Venice or Documenta—was to underpin many regional biennials from this time on. The biennial's Board was self-consciously setting its biennial and its curator up as the mediator, meeter-and-greeter between the international and national art worlds: as the point where the very different and separate international and national art worlds intersected. This was significant. The aim was to actually intervene in both international and Australian art: to represent each to the other; and to push to be part of a nascent network of globalised artist movements in which international artists would create new work in a regional location (the concept that Kaldor had fostered) and to create the networks that would allow Australian artists to participate in European biennials, and then definitely not as national exemplars. By 1979, the Sydney Biennale sought a

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22 Conversation with Nick Waterlow, Sydney, May 2000, Green's notes.

23 Burn, I., 1988, 'The Re-Appropriation of Influence', in N. Waterlow (ed. and curator), *Australian Biennale 1988: From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art c.1940–1988*, exh. cat., Sydney, Biennale of Sydney Ltd, pp. 41–48.

more ambitious regional and transcultural exchange than simply a curatorial selection of artists from across the world (the Venice model). Drawing together artists from across the globe (rather than from a particular idea of the central metropolis) was meant to spark new artistic dialogues between practitioners from hitherto disparate or even isolated contexts, rather than just to represent what was happening elsewhere to local audiences. Waterlow emphasised this in his short curatorial statement and, later, in retrospective interviews. He wrote, 'It is to be hoped various artists and exhibitions exchange programs, as well as other avenues of interaction, will become more complex, as indeed they should', and concluded his essay by re-emphasising the idea of artists' 'intercontinental dialogue.'<sup>24</sup> Waterlow invited many artists to Australia—including Jurgen Klauke, Klaus Rinke, Anne and Patrick Poirier and Marina Abramović/Ulay—hoping they would make new works for the occasion. The Biennale of Sydney flew the artists into Sydney, connected them with local hosts—with curators, artists or writers—and to local institutions such as art schools and their eager students. Abramović and Ulay, for instance, made a tantalising but frustrating tour to the Outback as well as to Melbourne, returning for a much longer visit in 1981 with an Outback visit that changed the course of their art and the meditative work that resulted, *Nightsea Crossing: Gold Found by the Artists*. This featured the pair sitting opposite each other for eight hours each day in an Art Gallery of New South Wales national survey exhibition, staring at each other. Two years later, in 1983, in a later iteration of *Nightsea Crossing* (subtitled *Conjunction*), at Amsterdam's Sonesta Koepelzaal, the artists sat for seven hours over four days with Charlie Tararu Tjungurrayi, with whom they had become very close during their second visit to Australia and who flew willingly to Amsterdam for the performance, and also with another friend, a Tibetan lama.<sup>25</sup> Beyond the aspiration that artists would make important works in Australia, the Biennale's international visitor program predicated a substantial dialogue with local artists, students and curators that extended beyond Sydney. With Biennale-supplied air tickets that routinely specified one Australian destination in addition to Sydney, artists often made at least one extra stop in another Australian city, speaking in local studio art schools or universities. Later Sydney Biennales continued to prioritise flying the participating international artists to art schools and universities beyond Sydney. Other visiting artists took time out to sun themselves on white, sandy beaches, at least until the arrival of more harassed schedules during the 1990s, from which point it became normal for artists to fly in, install their works, and quickly fly out for the next biennial engagement. At this point, and amidst the financial uncertainty that afflicted

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24 Nick Waterlow, 'European Dialogue', n.p., 1 p.

25 The work had been commissioned by the Museum Foder (a branch of the Stedelijk Museum); for a detailed description and a critical analysis of the ethics of cross-cultural collaboration within contemporary art, see Green, C. 2004, 'Group Soul: Who Owns the Artist Fusion?', *Third Text*, vol. 18, no. 71, November, pp. 595–608.

the Sydney Biennale during the mid-1990s, such highly organised expectations of substantial artist dialogue petered out and visits to other art centres, if they occurred, which was less and less, were not organised or funded by the Biennale.

## Import/Export Trade

Inherent in the aspiration to dialogue is the presumption that biennials have an affective, transformational power, not just for the careers of the invited artists, but also in the world picture of what is both global art and national art. The 1979 Biennale of Sydney, like almost all important biennials from the mid-1970s onwards, sought to intervene as well as to reflect.

The key to the success of a gatekeeper event was to be the invited, auteur curator who owed little or nothing to the local host art museum or *Kunsthalle*, and in fact was probably a complete outsider to local art museums, but who would have access to international networks of artists, or who would know precisely who to ask for that advice. In other words, Tom McCullough in 1976 and now Nick Waterlow in 1979 had thoroughly internalised the auteur curator model of Harald Szeemann, even if they were hindered by a lack of resources. Both had successfully adapted Szeemann's improvisatory but highly centralised Documenta method, with a dedicated group of talent scouts and committed advisers rather than a team of professionals backed by proper resources. McCullough recalled, 'I had virtually no staff. It was Tom McCullough, full stop, for most of 1976 and one really had to get on with the professional staff of the gallery.'<sup>26</sup> Waterlow was forced to accept the same approach as McCullough due to short-staffing and scant resources but, like McCullough, he was able to rely on the spaces—the white cubes—and the highly professional installation and security staff of a major art museum, the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This was crucial, if in the future sometimes very reluctantly offered. For the AGNSW, the Biennale meant ceding control of its exhibition spaces during a peak period of the calendar to an external curator working beyond the museum's control. São Paulo, by contrast, was almost from its outset housed in an expansive, late modernist Oscar Niemeyer-designed building adequate to its great ambitions and marked by vast sight-lines. The Biennale of Sydney's venues were, quite simply, less suitable for the often outsized, unconventional works that artists were increasingly planning and which Biennial directors wished to include. The later 1986 and 1988 Sydney Biennales, which were also directed by Nick Waterlow, made use of an extra venue, Pier 2/3, a gargantuan timber structure like a vast ex-industrial loft thrust out over the cold, blue waters of Sydney Harbour itself. This provided rough, industrial spaces of enormous proportions

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26 McCullough, T. 2002, interview in Latos-Valier, *Biennale of Sydney 2002: 1973–1998* (viewed 14 April 2010).

for large installations. It was immensely atmospheric, bitterly cold during Sydney's winter storms, and unexpectedly expensive to fit out and make safe. By 1990, space emerged as a major problem. René Block, director of that year's Sydney Biennale, was forced to make major cuts to his exhibition. A substantial part of his deeply cosmopolitan, Fluxus-oriented biennial—in Block's words, a 'well-curated historical exhibition on the topic of the readymade'—remained in shipping containers even while the AGNSW launched a large exhibition by a popular but, from the point of view of younger artists and critics engaged with new art forms, deeply conservative local hero, painter Brett Whiteley. His large, fairly conventional and eclectic paintings of sojourns in Paris and memories of Sydney Harbour occupied the exhibition spaces not allocated to the Biennale; Block tactfully reminisced, 'However, constant budget cuts forced me to merge the two into a single exhibition, which turned out okay in the end.'<sup>27</sup>

The Biennale of Sydney's problems arose from its origins. Sydney's chronic disorganisation, sometimes erratic timing (in the 1970s it was triennial), lack of money and a consistent record of secrecy and rationing of information to the public were the unintended products of a tiny, idealistic, semi-private operation, operating in an ambiguous zone between public and private. Apart from Transfield's continuing sponsorship, the Biennale of Sydney was hindered by inadequate local funding as well as a precarious hold on its exhibition spaces: the former was alleviated by a dramatic increase in Federal Government funding in time for the 2006 Biennale; the latter was ameliorated by the Biennale's consolidation in the harbourside Museum of Contemporary Art and the colonisation from 2008 onwards of a spectacular and immensely popular new site, a derelict shipyards on Cockatoo Island in the middle of Sydney Harbour. Freight costs always restricted the movement of large exhibitions into the southern hemisphere. So, for years, participating countries contributed a large part of the Biennale's operating costs by underwriting individual artists, usually without the control that national pavilions would have given them. 1982 Sydney Biennale director William Wright observed, 'The problem has been building a funding base', remembering that foreign government arts agencies' support often amounted to up to 60 per cent of the Biennale's budget, and guessed that Sydney survived on between 5–10 per cent of the operating budget of the Biennale of Venice.<sup>28</sup> So, an exhibition of international impact and representation was put together on a very small budget, though that budget, as we have seen, seemed large and even recklessly spent to many local artists.

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27 Block, R. 2002, interview in Latos-Valier, *Biennale of Sydney 2002: 1973–1998* (viewed 14 April 2010).

28 William Wright, interview in T. Maloon, 1982, 'The Sydney Biennale: Notes Towards a Post-Mortem', *Art Network*, vol. 6, pp. 9–13, 10; Wright, W., 2002, interview, in Latos-Valier, *Biennale of Sydney 2002: 1973–1998* (viewed 14 April 2010).

Waterlow went on to be sole artistic director of the Sydney Biennale two more times, in 1986 and 1988, as a co-director in 2000, and to serve on the Biennale's powerful Board for decades. He was murdered in tragic circumstances in 2009. From the early 1990s on, the Biennale of Sydney was to move into a confusing and more contradictory place in both Australian and international art as an under-funded but spectacular event focused on Euramerica with a smattering of Australian artists, whereas the first Biennales of Sydney, two decades before, had aspired to a more generous Asian focus than their successors. However, the extraordinarily ambitious Asia-Pacific Triennial (APT), based in the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) in subtropical Brisbane, a large provincial capital several hundred kilometres north of Sydney, was to fill a more important regional role after 1993. The APT's team of curators, led by recently appointed QAG director Doug Hall and curator Caroline Turner, had quickly identified the Pacific and the emerging artistic scene of Asia as APT's sole focus. APT found itself more or less immediately in competition with the Fukuoka, Yokohama and Gwangju biennials, well before the launch of a host of more recent Asian biennials. None of these four large biennials followed the Havana biennial model—low budget, bricolage, defiantly Third World—though smaller biennials such as Dacca, in Bangladesh, went down that road. The 1992 Biennale of Sydney—*The Boundary Rider*, directed by Anthony Bond, a chief curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales—was the last Biennale of Sydney of any artistic significance to North Atlantic audiences until a substantial injection of government money enabled more generous and serious exhibitions: curator Charles Merewether's 2006 Biennale of Sydney, 'Zones of Contact' and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's 2008 Biennale, 'Revolutions: Forms That Turn' were once again major biennials shaped by well-connected directors who could leverage important loans from European and North American collectors and the artists' galleries in order to mirror a world picture based decisively on the emerging contemporaneity that had come to define contemporary art.

## Conclusion

After 1979, the Sydney Biennale had become Australia's mediator with the global—or more accurately the 'global' art world of Europe and North America. There were no more extraordinary exhibitions from MoMA's International Council, nor would they have been received as such. But there was a certain lack of reciprocity in this development: the global did not actually need to come to Australia, even if the compensation was a trip to a balmy, subtropical, Southern Hemisphere city by the water, to a site as visually spectacular as Rio or the Biennale's original referent, Venice. Conspiratorial though it sounds, the Euramerican, North Atlantic centre just did not need to conduct a dialogue with



the provincial even in the former's initially grudging but by 1979 avid admission of the global. A biennial would never be an agent of change itself, for no clear consensus about political or community art in a period of change and upheaval such as 1979 was possible anyway, if biennials were dependent upon peak art museums such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which for better or worse were the bastions of entrenched local privilege as well as professionalism. Art museums in relatively small art worlds were, it seemed to radical critics, bound to infantilise their audiences, shoe-horning them into one of two categories: either the capacious strait-jackets of the few, cosseted insiders at exclusive, invitation-only events in which global visitors encountered their peers; or else into the constricting, conservative demands of the imaginary common man or woman posited by populist and provincial newspaper reviewers, who obdurately refused the world picture of contemporaneity. But the 1979 biennial, we would say, at least aspired to escaping this double bind in the developing image of a globalised artistic contemporaneity—manifest in the concept of dialogue, in Waterlow's hope that invited artists would realise new works on the ground in Sydney in cooperation with locals—rather than the image of a vanguard. The third Bienal de la Habana, of 1989, is widely taken within the critical and rapidly-emerging area of exhibition histories to have inaugurated a new mode of exhibition-making in which the concept of artist dialogue was paramount.<sup>29</sup> We suggest that the Third Biennale of Sydney, of 1979, which pre-dated the Bienal de la Habana by a decade, deserves global acknowledgement for its understanding that two of the images of contemporaneity which a biennial would henceforth embody—and which would become key tropes of global contemporary art—would be dialogue and collaboration in place of the image of a vanguard. Artist collaborations inevitably foreground the overarching field of world memory, and post-studio, cross-cultural artist collaborations have become a special—and symptomatic—case of this in the field of contemporary art.

At a time when regional artists were working in a cultural geography of destabilised but still crushingly hegemonic centre/periphery relationships, the 1979 Biennale offered a confusing, sometimes inspirational and apparently contradictory place for local artists. For them, it brought welcome news in the form of recent, major works by international artists but it also brought an infuriating exclusion from their circles for the number of local artists was a small percentage of the exhibitors and the visitors were often carefully chaperoned or had set themselves over-optimistically tight schedules, oblivious to the 24 hours flight time from Europe or New York. The issue of artists and audiences for biennials in regional centres went further than artists' concerns about exclusion and lack of representation to the deeper question of whether something other than a token link between local and international art was possible. Local artist

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29 Weiss, R., Camnitzer, L., Fusco, C. and Kapur, G., 2011, *Making Art Global (Part 1): The Third Havana Biennial 1989*, London, Afterall Books.

organisations and activist collectives had wondered in 1979 if the picture of a globally focused biennial was worthwhile. If the Sydney Biennale continued to occupy its particular import/export niche, importing Euramerican art and attempting to host a dialogue with that military-industrial complex, they had argued, such a small, under-funded Sydney Biennale was not going to do anything else other than passively conduct international fame, style and art-world glamour. The 1979 Biennial's problems were to be replicated in the short-lived Johannesburg Biennial during the mid-1990s, and both Sydney and Johannesburg struggled with the issue of local relevance, or the question of whom a biennial is for. The global and provincial art economies, both of which the Sydney Biennale sought to include, have consistently proved to be almost intractably and mutually exclusive.