

Boundary Rider: 9th Biennale of Sydney 1992-93

This biennale provided an opportunity to explore ways and means of including artists from cultures who at that time did not have access to the international contemporary or historical avant-garde. This text is not from the catalogue but a lecture given subsequently when asked to talk about the context of what seems to have been the first truly global biennale curated as an exhibition. The invitation came from post -graduate programmes in USA and was delivered at Albright Knox Museum in Buffalo in a symposium *Why Biennales?* January 2009

Global art after 1989

The conditions for an expanded view of “The International” were already set during the early 1980s. Regionalism was one of the relativising strategies in post-modern theory although in practice it was largely limited to discussion of perceived centre/periphery hierarchies within the Western mainstream or with other cultures that it appropriated into itself.

It was clear that there was a growing appetite for difference of another kind to relieve what some saw as the enervating repetition of the new. This was applicable to theory but even more strongly to the marketplace. For example in Australia Aboriginal art began to take off as a market commodity in the 1980s and to be included by curators in surveys of contemporary art, for example Bernice Murphy’s *Australian Perspectives* 1981 and 1983 and Nick Waterlow’s *Biennale* 1979. At about the same time hitherto inaccessible avant-garde art from The Soviet Union was rushed into the hungry markets as Glasnost began to ease communications between USSR and the West.

Rubin’s exhibition *Primitivism* at MOMA in 1984 stimulated heated discussion about appropriation of tribal art by modern artists. David Elliott curated exhibitions of artists from the Soviet Block, from India and Africa at MoMA Oxford but it was not till 1989 that Jean-Hubert Martin really attempted to bring objects from significantly different cultural sources together as contemporary art. *Magiciens de la Terre* was a landmark exhibition. The thesis was that you could exhibit tribal and sacred art from other cultures along side western avant-garde practices by embracing them under the umbrella of a spirit of place. For example Jean-Hubert juxtaposed Richard Long’s mud drawings with sand painting from Northern Australia. Critics including Hal Foster thoroughly deconstructed this strategy for obscuring the specificity of both cultural contexts, but these juxtapositions were not based on purely formal association nor can they be described as appropriation. Martin’s belief that great art marks humankind’s relationship

to the world from which it arises may not be a sufficiently incisive tool for comparing such objects but neither were the objects completely incommensurate.

The fall out from this exhibition has been extraordinary changing the traditional boundaries of contemporary art. We all know the arguments for and against Jean-Hubert's strategy. Spiritual attachment to the earth is not a core value of conceptual and post-conceptual art so the selection of western artists was narrow in its scope and sacred non-western art was ripped from its legitimate context. However it was a genuine attempt to be inclusive and to find a meaningful umbrella to allow diversity in a single cultural space. Artefacts that had been subject to anthropological study now needed to be understood in the light of contemporary visual art theory.

This situation raised two very obvious problems. Some artists and curators from the third world saw this as moving from one form of hegemony to another with the effect of producing the key bugs of globalisation; assimilation and then homogenisation. The other problem is for the West; if objects created under different systems of belief could be included within the cannon of contemporary art we might no longer be able to understand art through a system of shared histories and theories. If this was to be the case, what was to become of all our art historical and theoretical scholarship? Some saw this as undermining their life's work while others revelled in the inevitable relativism that this would bring into our discourse.

Curatorial Strategies to accommodate diversity

In spite of the ethical difficulty and lack of theoretical consensus many curators have embraced diversity for a variety of reasons ranging from romancing the exotic to a genuine democratic commitment to inclusiveness. In the absence of a universal critical framework these Curators have sought *presentational* strategies to facilitate integration. This is not always supported by a sufficiently rigorous framework with the result that difference is merely masked and boundaries blurred without advancing our understanding of individual works or possible cross currents.

BOUNDARY RIDER 9th BIENNALE OF SYDNEY



Mexican Border photographed 1991 during Biennale research

It was against this background of debate that I began work on *Boundary Rider* the 9th Biennale of Sydney 1992/3. Sydney Biennale depends substantially on participating government's contributions to bring the artists and their work to Sydney. This typically restricts the ambition and scale of work that can be brought from developing countries or from places with no government infrastructure to support the arts. However I was determined to include as many artists not represented by the wealthy and traditional participants and had to find strategies to deal with the issues of difference outlined above and to avoid obvious demarcations between the haves and the have nots as well as to attempt some kind of rationale for their inclusion.

I decided that if the spirit of place was found to embrace works that were incommensurable and set up false correlations perhaps politics might be a more coherent guide to my selection. It was after all a time of heightened political tension coming at the point when the cold war alignments were unravelling and economic realignment seemed inevitable. This was to be my underlying guide; however I needed an aesthetic or curatorial strategy to make sense of the diversity.

Put very briefly I employed two strategies; Material strategies by artists that related to bricolage and then juxtaposing works of differing levels of apparent sophistication or “finish” from both developed and developing countries. Dan Cameron noted the latter strategy when he developed his

exhibition *Raw and Cooked, Cocido y Crudo* in 1994-5. It was no coincidence that we both drew on Levi Straus; this is in part an anthropological debate.

I decided to work as much as possible with artists who use found materials or other forms of cultural bricolage. In this way there would be a material consistency that might diffuse the technological divide while providing a shared language facilitated by the capacity for everyday objects to trigger memories and associations. For example Anselm Kiefer might have been one of the most celebrated artists of the day but his choice of poor material and rough finish might make the work open to aesthetic juxtaposition with works that were emerging from less known artists around the world.

Bricolage



Ashley Bickerton *Stylepiece headtrip* 1992

Bickerton was at the time one of the stars of the commodity fetish movement based in the East Village of NY. His work was often modelled on surfing and scuba diving equipment – Bickerton was an ocean worshiper and usually associated with a hedonistic surf culture, this work however Included an ironic reference to colonial consumption of exotic images of tribal people in the Pacific these were hung in a grid framed by canvas rolls and straps as in an explorer's kit. Below them a grid of canisters full of exposed film was arranged on the floor, editing of cultural memory perhaps?



Kamol Phaosavasdi *Repercussions of Agriculture* 1992

Phaosavasdi made a work critical of the process of modernisation concentrating on the pollution that is poisoning the once beautiful countryside and urban waterways of Thailand. Kamol used found objects to make his point including the rubber gloves provided to protect us from the poisoned earth.



Mladen Stilinovic *Dead Optimism* 1989-90

Like many artists emerging from the old soviet block Mladen looks back to the old avant-garde for inspiration rather than to an easy adaptation of everything capitalist or American. His installations take the form of Suprematist exhibitions but make use of found objects.



Dominique Blain *Missa* 1992

Blain is a Canadian artist whose work often references violence and militarism. Here a fan kept a flag fluttering while the sound track of marching feet created a multi sensory experience of an army on the move. It is interesting to see how a found object such as a shoe can be made to signify in very different ways within installations. Later on we will see how Doris Salcedo also uses shoes to represent a violent situation but in her case the shoes signify the lost victims.



Svetlana Kopystianski *Trainer* 1992

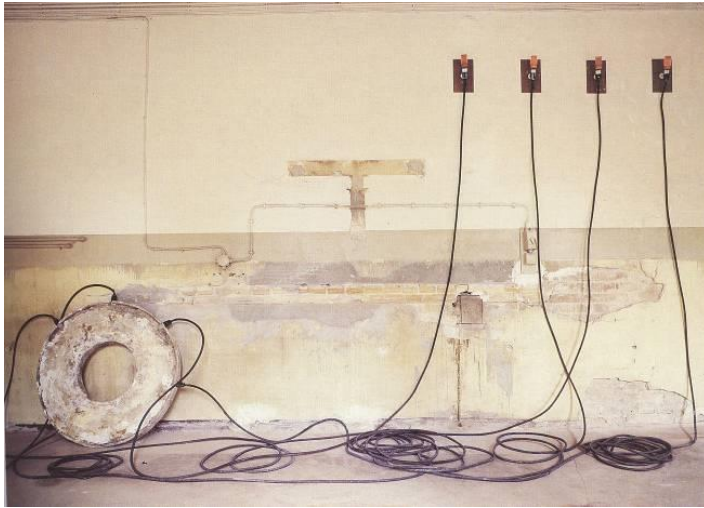
Kopystianski recalls the role of the gym in the old Soviet Union where she grew up and suggests the same mechanical rigour applied to the word

invariably obscures real ownership of the content. The book held a very powerful almost sacred status in the popular Russian imaginary. Writers were looked up to for their leadership and vision. *Trainer* integrates a library with the furniture of a gymnasium. The juxtaposition immediately makes us think of the totalitarian state's ideology of healthy minds and bodies at the service of the well-oiled machinery of a supposedly utopian society. In this way Svetlana represents control of information in the form of books with ideology, with architecture and the apparatus of repression.



Border Art Workshop Stories from the edges San Diego-Tijuana 1992

The first part of this project was an installation made in collaboration with children from the border area between USA and Mexico and reinstalled in the Bond store in Sydney the second part was an installation at Cabramatta done in collaboration with children from the community of “boat people”. Many refugees that had not previously told their personal stories allowed the children to interview them for this project which was installed as part of an installation in Cabramatta and later toured round Australia to places where other arrivals lived.



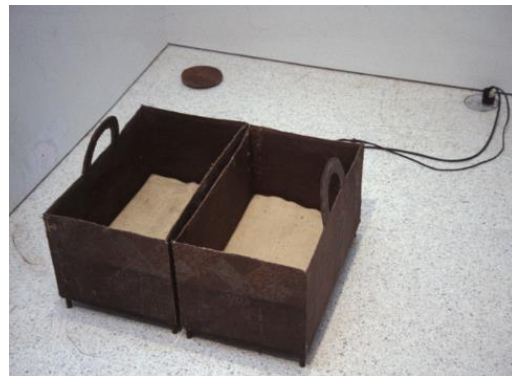
Jorg Herold Haus Museum

Herold was one of a group of artists I found working in Leipzig, in East Germany. At the Bond store this allegory of bodily energy that flows through architecture in various conduits was completely at home it looked as if it may have been left over from some past function of the building.

BODY references in anticipation of my exhibition Body 1997



Miroslaw Balka *Untitled* 1992



Balka's work invariably used to reference the scale of his own body and of the architecture of his grandmother's house where he grew up and had his studio. Body heat was also given off by this particular piece. Later on he also started working with the scale of the gas chambers at the German death camp which was near to the village outside Warsaw where he still lives.



Annette Lemieux *Body Fluid* 1991

In 1991 AIDS was being faced globally for the first time and consequently body fluids took on a whole new meaning. Here protective leggings support a basin of fluid where on an actual body the bladder and genitals would be located.



Orlan *Untitled* 1992

Orlan has been making her body the site of her work since the late 1970s. During the 80s and 90s she made a number of performances in which she underwent plastic surgery firstly to remake herself in the image of a Renaissance beauty by creating merged identities of Venus from different artists and giving this to the surgeon to replicate in her flesh. More recently she began to make herself more monstrous for example giving herself incipient horns.



Doris Salcedo *Los atrabiliarios* 1990-92

Salcedo was in many ways the central figure of the exhibition for me. Her installation of *Los Atrabiliarios* depicts embodied memory as it addresses the dialectics of violence that have ruined her country of Colombia. It is a personal memorial that in a way breaks the silence imposed by the disappearance of villagers all over the country and acts as a silent testimony of loss. It not only dramatically embodies a memorial but it also describes the very idea of embodied memories. Niches have been cut into the wall of the gallery and repeatedly reworked to create the subtle appearance of ancient and much used architectural features such as spaces for ex-voto offerings in a church. Salcedo has placed shoes into the niches belonging to

people who have been ‘disappeared’ by militia in the ongoing violence in Colombia. The niches are then sealed over with a membrane of cow bladder. The skin is literally sutured into the plaster of the wall which comes to have the feel of scar tissue. These people she represents are not abstractions for her she has lost many of her own family in this way.



Anselm Kiefer Women of the revolution 1992

Kiefer was included with Polke, Richter and Beuys in an exhibition within the Biennale that explored the boundaries and congruencies between painting and photography in late 20th century art. Kiefer's installation included a large format B/W photograph but it also included lead beds each of which had small, traces intended to elicit memories or associations with particular women associated with the French Revolution.

Indigenous art: strategies for bringing it into the international

I considered that Aboriginal art had been included in the Biennale in the past in a somewhat tokenistic way, however good the work was in its own terms it seemed to have nothing in common with the underlying presumptions of the selection of other artists representing an international avant-garde. I was not ready to jettison the history of the avant-garde so how then could I proceed?



Dolly Nampajimpa Daniels *Untitled (my place)* 1992

Dolly normally made dot paintings of the landscape but her main concern was working to improve the lot of her people. Through an interpreter I invited her to show us about her life - not in painting that would have been at odds with the prevailing strategies of the exhibition - but rather to find some way of bringing objects from her daily life that would convey her circumstances to the world.

After some Months Dolly called for a truck I had little choice but to trust her at this stage so I complied, What arrived was her home, a humpy made in a creek bed west of Alice out of old timber, tarpaulins, car axels – whatever came to hand, a real bricoleur's solution. Dolly recreated her home in the Bond store and for some time she lived within the exhibition, playing cards and talking to the curious. It could not more clearly have shown the world the extraordinary conditions many Aboriginal people experience. Dolly subsequently repeated this project both in Australia and overseas.



Richard Bell and Campfire group

Richard Bell was the principle agent behind the campfire contribution. Not only did he play an important role in the installation but he also had me attempt to place an ad in the Australian real estate section offering as large property that had been mismanaged for 200 years. The Paper refused the ad

on grounds of truth in advertising! At the Symposium Bell was supposed to speak but instead called me to the podium and gave me a list of instructions, to lead the audience in a litany of apologies with audience response I apologise after each item, I did it of course but some people were very uncomfortable I recall.

My invitation to Bell was something of a provocation, I had asked for it. He was proposing something about Captain Cook and I said I was bored with Cook what about the fact that as a white curator I was suspicious that he would get his act together and deliver, after nearly flooring me he took the challenge and more than matched me.



Adrian Piper and Brenda Croft *Conference call* 1992

This collaboration came about when Adrian wanted to make a work with images of Aboriginal people and I suggested that this would be best done as collaboration. Here the office chairs face the images of Brenda's friends in Redfern the telephones each have a different aboriginal sound track, each patiently trying to teach dialects to a European.

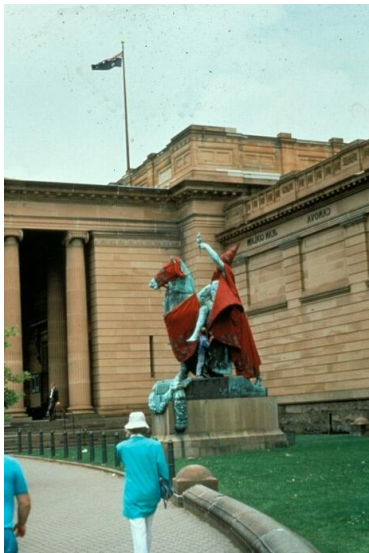


Tim Johnson Visualisation 1992 & Gordon Bennett Self portrait (ancestor figures) 1992

Johnson makes this installation an explicit bricollage or collaboration of cultures and cultural artifacts, Aboriginal, old hippie, Tibetan, Hopi Indian etc..

Bennett here used objects and photos that related to his family history arranged around the mirror where identity is daily negotiated.

SITE SPECIFICITY



Art Gallery façade Hany Armanious interventions 1992

Armanious also appeared with unexpected interventions throughout the Biennale in both major venues. The riders at the entrance to the Gallery became Clansmen.



Guillaume Bijl *Horizon systems* 1992

Guillaume Bijl created a replica of a sponsor's room in the exhibition, which was so convincing people including the critic Elwyn Lynne took it at face value – in fact Jack had to be removed from the sofa by guards under duress because he disagreed with them that this was a sculpture.



Guillermo Gomez Pena and Coco Fusco *The year of the white bear* 1992

Guillermo Gomez Pena and Coco Fusco performed in the Australian Museum where they posed as previously unknown Indigenous Amazonian Indians discovered by or rather discovering the West. They lived in the cage for the first two weeks of the Biennale then we replaced their presence with a video of their interactions with the bemused audiences who came across them there.



Charles Anderson Dis/appearance (still life) 1992

Anderson had recently completed an artist in residency programme in a Melbourne hospital where he had worked with cancer patients. The installations he made in hospital made use of surgical equipment, trolleys, and other furnishings often modified by using bandages. In the Bond store he found old trolleys and tools broken and discarded that had been lying around since the days when it had been an active wool store. He “repaired” these objects with bandages and incorporated them into this site specific installation.



Dan Wolgers intervention at The Bond store 1992

I asked the Swedish artist Dan Wolgers if he would be interested to take a very challenging site as a problem for him to solve when he arrived. This appealed to him as I had expected it would this row of windows was the challenge it took him 3 days to come up with the solution which in effect was a very subtle and rich play on the theme of boundaries. By breaking all 360 panes of glass he drew attention to the fact that although this part of the show was outside the museum it was still a contained exhibiting space. Through the opaque glass we could now see beyond the museum to the world outside thereby rendering the boundary of the exhibition literally permeable.



Richard Wilson Not too clear on the viewfinder 1992

Wilson is best known for his subtle and sometimes radical interventions into architectural space. The Saatchi oil installation *20:50* for example filled a room with black sump oil with just a narrow walkway through the middle, the total reflectivity of the glossy black oil produced an alarmingly disorienting effect on the viewer who ventured up this passage where the world above appeared below.

I sent Richard Wilson a video of the part of the Bond store where I hope they would work. As I filmed the various parts of the room trying to give them a graphic account of space, texture, atmosphere, even smell, I spoke into the mike giving a running commentary. When Richard arrived in Sydney to see the building in person he experienced the space very differently from the impression he had gained from my video.

His response was to displace the fire door to hang it in the middle of this entry hall he then carefully engraved into its surface the entire text of my video commentary with a dentist's drill. Here we see the displacement of

description and reality manifested in a painstaking but humorous spoof. More seriously it was possible for the viewer to stand in the space and compare my description with the reality for themselves. This was the first installation I had seen that directly critiqued translation.

Counsell was also invited to intervene in the Bond Store and she too had a video. This was a space just outside the entrance to the exhibition and had been cordoned off by the fire warden because it was too far from the back of the space to a fire door. Knowing Melanie's work however I thought she would love the ambience of the room and might be able to come up with an idea.



Melanie Counsell Intervention at the Bondstore 1992

After some days of contemplation she decided to build a plate glass wall completely closing off the room making it seem as if it were an image of the space, it almost felt like a holograph of the room but this did not reproduce in any of the photos. By framing reality this way she made it somehow all the more strange. At the same time it incorporated a beautiful old room into the exhibition while meeting the fire warden's requirements.