



Superpositioned:  
*Regionality and Identity,  
Meaning and Critical Experience*

The number for this *Biennale of Sydney*—twenty-one—could be understood to suggest a significant coming of age, most forcefully given that it was the first of its kind with a curator from Asia. Mami Kataoka, chief curator at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, offered a lofty and ostensibly up-beat title and thematic, *Superposition: Equilibrium and Engagement*. Her position as curator opened up or helped to rehearse in a slightly higher key, where precisely Australia is culturally situated; or more so, the shifts in cultural allegiance and association. If not since the 1980s, then at least since 1993 with the appearance of the first *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT)* in Brisbane, there has been a growing consciousness of Australia's relationship with Asia. Definitions such as "recognition" or "realisation" cannot be so glibly used, as the notion of Australia's 'Asian-ness' is a conflicted and uneven one. Certainly this approach is used to extract Australia from its malaise with the once strong (and perhaps soon defunct) Great Britain. Its identification with Asia has a much broader symbolic reach, as it can emphasise both historically and culturally that an ever-growing number of Australians only identify with Great Britain in the most superficially de facto way, through a recent historical past which they did not partake in genealogically. Kataoka, it is presumed, brought with her an Asian perspective, which is to say a context that is not perceptibly Euro-American. But this *Biennale* may be a case of too little, too late. This concern is compounded more than slightly with what was, to this writer, the most perplexing exhibition rationale in the *Biennale's* history.

Kataoka boasts a considerable curatorial pedigree. In addition to her work at the Mori Art Museum and a position at the Kyoto Museum of Art and Design, she has worked at the Hayward Gallery in London, been a guest at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, and a co-Artistic Director of the 9th *Gwangju Biennale* in 2012. This history has certainly left its imprint and helps to explain her choice of artists which, when not from Asia (Japan and China understandably predominate) were from the UK (mainly England) and Western Europe, with a disproportionate contribution from smaller countries such as Switzerland and Belgium, whose only interest in Asia is limited perhaps to anxiety over immigration or innocuous commodities. England featured favorably—as if Australia is forever condemned never to escape it—but the real star and beneficiary of Kataoka's curatorial beneficence was Chinese artist Ai Weiwei with whom she has worked on several projects, and in this instance exhibited three works at different sites. Glaringly, the cultural loser as such was North America; the choice of Australian artists in certain cases also conveyed scrutiny. The country-distribution of artists in any biennale is not an easy task, and it can be subservient to budgetary restraints as much as personal preferences. Although cultural representation should never be a metric, the dimension that Kataoka presented was still one that was very Japanese. This degree is a global cultural tribalism in which Japan's historic allies and rivals are placed together with the countries with which it has traditionally been in thrall since the beginning of the Meiji Period in 1868: Britain, but especially France, and along with Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland. As if mirroring some longstanding national anxiety based on a still relatively recent past, not only was the USA almost invisible, but Germany wholly so, if you discount all those fashionably "living and working" in Berlin.

A short, critical audit such as this of the *Biennale of Sydney's* artistic demographic may lead to conclude that its curation was conceivably the most difficult and thankless of all biennales. This is quite a claim, but this logic is based not on its shifting financial fortunes (apparently for the first time this year saw a number of ticketed artist presentations and associated events<sup>1</sup>), but in Australia's position with regard to the rest of the world. For its geographical isolation has always made such questions about what kind of country we are especially exigent. And while the way in which a country thinks of itself might always be fluid, Australia's historical affinities with the UK and

its military and trade allegiances with the USA are mitigated by Asia, and by a significant migrant population whose identification with the two Anglophone nations is minimal, at best. To further complicate this dynamic, many immigrants either seek to dim their cultural roots in favour of identification as Australian (such as it might be) while others amplify their mixed, or removed origins. Additionally, there is a movement in Australian indigenous cultures of reclamation that includes art and language, which has resulted in yet another shift in awareness and possession.

One salutary result of this is to stir up again the waters of postcolonial guilt – the glib ‘us and them’ dialectic, one that has and continues to be carefully preserved by artists identifying with the oppression of such pasts as it gives them infinite material. For paradoxically, it is in the act of reclaiming and repossession of identity that individuals take stock of the diversity of cultural forces pressing upon them, meaning that, now more than ever, a global identity is to embrace several identities, and to remark on identity’s mutability, subject to more than outside ideologies, to will and creativity.

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After a national soul-searching over the nature of Australian art in the 1970s and 1980s by conceptual artist Ian Burn and his colleagues, it is perhaps because of the shifting ambiguities that globalisation imposes, that similar issues are now not raised, not only because of their difficulty but perhaps they are not seen as important. The transition into the new millennium proved to be harder than expected, at least for a biennale or festival curator who was tasked with providing a theme apposite to signs of the times. A sense of impending gloom was offset by an appeal to optimism in the 2002 *Biennale of Sydney, (The World May Be) Fantastic*, curated by English artist Richard Grayson. This exhibition had a significantly European inclination, and was criticised for perpetuating the then still-fresh notion propagated by the ‘young British artists’ of High Art Lite, in which the motley and quirky was preferred over the unwelcome and the tragic.

A different kind of elusion was dispatched by Portuguese curator Isabel Carlos in 2004 for her *On Reason and Emotion*, in what was by all accounts an equal nadir to what followed the 2010 *Biennale*. Working from an apparently inane premise, the facile dichotomy of reason and emotion, conjuring up some of the most banal binaries of man and woman, mind and body, Carlos again asserted the primacy of Europe through the continued patronage of then fashionable art stars such as AES&F, Francis Alÿs and Bruce Nauman. And where there were exceptions to the rule, as such they tended to assert more of the same; that is, all the clichéd expectations of contemporary art were met. While Australian indigenous artists were begrudgingly presented (such as Gordon Hookey and Elisabeth Nyumi Nungurrayi), the overwhelming voice presented in the name of Otherness was from the American Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham (living in Europe since 1994). While having its somewhat obligatory contingent of Australian artists,<sup>2</sup> notably Derek Kreckler, Daniel von Sturmer and Pat Brassington (arguably among the best), this *Biennale* was so inclined towards Europe as to essentially remove America and Asia from view, the latter only represented by Emiko Kasahara (Japan, “lives and works” in New York), Koo Jeong-a (Korea, “lives and works” in Paris) and Xing Danwen (China, “lives and works” in New York). Given that for many Chinese artists working internationally after the fall-out from Deng’s ‘opening up’ of China in the late 1980s being still fresh, this disproportion appeared neglectful, if not a missed opportunity. It is also instructive to consider that at the time of Carlos’ *Biennale*, the *Asia-Pacific Triennial* was still in its infancy, having begun a

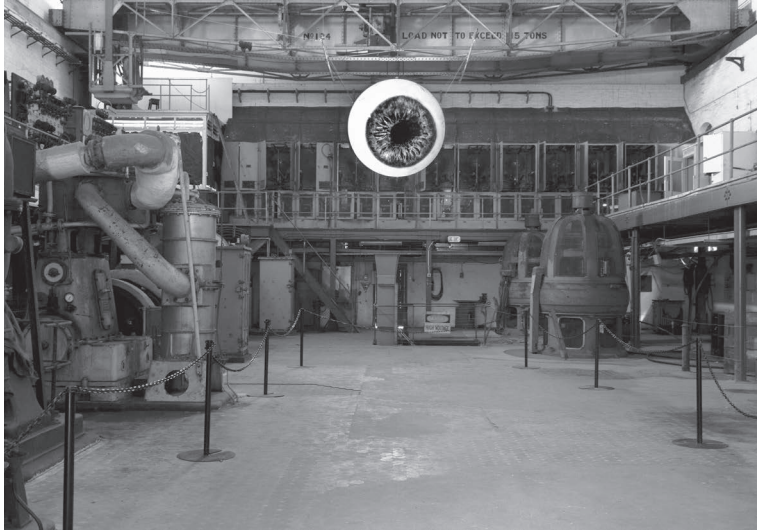
decade earlier. At that time there was enough critical mass of material to initiate debate as to the relevance and shape of such an exhibition, but it was difficult not to perceive this Euro-Australian *Biennale* having been assembled as if the *APT* had Asia 'covered' to allow Carlos to carry on with the serious business of curating artists that 'we' might understand.

Yet it was also precisely at this time that this collective pronoun became noticeably unstable, not only in the predictable multicultural sense, but more so because of globalisation's increasing multi-dimensionality. Since its inception, the *APT* did much to animate and circulate debate as to how Asian art differs from that of Euro-American traditions and even of the efficacy of such ventures, when by the early 2000s the meaning of mass art exhibitions was becoming progressively scrutinised. In addition to the concern over censorship (either self- or country-initiated) in order to project one or another image of nationhood, was one matter of vitiating corporate interests, and the artists who most congenially fed into them. A corporation, for instance, is not going to sponsor an exhibition containing an artist whose work comments on its misdoings. The most recent example of this was that of the *Biennale of Sydney's* major sponsor, the Australian company Transfield, a subsidiary of which managed services in offshore immigration detention centres that caused such a public furor in 2014 when seized upon by numerous "political" and "engaged" artists demonstrating their pristine civil society credentials. Yet it was indeed the recent example of Transfield that showed the complexity and intricacy of corporate involvement and that to append ideology too readily is to be naïve to the countless corporate interests in any large cultural event, undertaking or institution. Suffice to say that without Transfield's substantial historical support in 2016 and 2018, the *Biennale* has found itself critically strapped for funds, which meant smaller events and fewer artists.

From a numerical point of view—turnstile numbers—the most popular *APT* was its fifth iteration in 2007, most likely attributable to the official opening of the new Gallery of Modern Art (adding to the Queensland Art Gallery), in addition to hosting numerous favourites or soon-to-be, of Asian art—Ai Weiwei, Anish Kapoor, Yang Fudong and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. An attempt was made for a number of Australian artists to be placed in dialogue with their Asian and Southeast Asian contemporaries. (In retrospect, Ai Weiwei, already a central figure of the then prominent wave of Chinese contemporary art, had shown some sign of his inclination towards cultural disjunction with his chandelier entitled *Boomerang* [2006], installed dramatically over the water feature near the Gallery's entrance, according to the *APT* catalogue presented as an "extravagant symbol of affluence and aspiration", more in keeping with the kitsch of hotel lobbies, "that China's increasingly affluent middle class could hope for in the adornment of their homes, hotels and shopping malls.")

The *Biennale of Sydney* that preceded this *APT* was the comparatively intellectually weighty *Zones of Contact* curated by expatriate Australian Charles Merewether, who up until then had spent a significant period of time in the USA at the Getty Centre in Los Angeles (1994-2004). *Zones of Contact* was the closest to any form of creditable international dialogue between artists that also evoked the way in which they travel and draw from external cultures, being significantly different from the primitivist urges of their modernist colleagues. Merewether's engagement and sympathy with Australian art also meant that artists were not chosen according to superficial picture theory ('this looks like that') to which many indigenous artists have long fallen foul in the frequently uncritical blending of traditional motifs with Euro-American abstract painting traditions. In an interview, Merewether expressed his sensitivity to the porosity of Australia's boundaries and the need to see Australian art well beyond the art history and criticism schooled in discourses from London or New York, and as a counter to Carlos' many omissions:

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[I] just didn't understand why South East Asia shouldn't be part of something much larger in terms of my research. My feeling... was just that these were areas I really should research to find out what's going on there. Obviously, the Asia-Pacific Triennial has done a terrific job in focusing on South East Asia and Asia, but that shouldn't mean that the Sydney Biennale shouldn't address it, they should, it should be part of the international focus.<sup>3</sup>

Instructively, Merewether's *Biennale* demonstrated the way in which readings of works shifted as they crossed boundaries and inhabited different spaces, a crucial insight especially germane to globalisation and the global condition of forced and voluntary migration, not only of people but of objects, art and other commodities. Even if Merewether seemed to show a bias toward the old traditions, his curation reflected an inquisitiveness and inclusiveness to Asian art that has since been a silent corrective to almost every following *Biennale*.

Any attempt to summarise all *Biennales of Sydney* up to the current presentation is not my objective here, but rather to provide a stronger impression of Australian culture's agonistic relationship to Asia, and perhaps more so the agonies of Asian culture with frameworks embedded in Euro-American traditions without much concern for their perspectives to reread and revise them. The 17th *Biennale of Sydney*, curated by David Elliott and titled *The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*, was an act of ideological *volte face*, insinuated in the title itself. For one of the beneficial effects of globalisation is to relieve Australian art of the interminable self-question about "Australian art". It is no longer beset by the hectoring speculations (think Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon *et al.*) about what a national art should be and look like. As with individual identities, homogenising visions have become shattered and more dispersed. (Perhaps this exhibition's greatest cultural solecism was its handling of indigenous artists, specifically the Yolngu, from the northeast cape of Arnhem Land. Elliott had sourced from an Australian millionaire businessman's sizeable collection of *Larrakitj*, or burial poles, and installed them en masse; this blank gesture matched by the lack of commentary in the catalogue or any other device for contextualisation. It was cultural tokenism at its most begrudging, a detail that said far more about global culture than the work itself could or wish to say, given that these poles are private, intimate symbols of death and mourning.) The 18th *Biennale* followed suit as an unsettlingly anodine attempt at cross-cultural inclusion. Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster's *All Our Relations* elided the tensions inevitable in cultural translation in favour of a carnivalesque approach. Visually sumptuous but ultimately free of challenges, in many ways it set the tone for much to follow, which was to satisfy the public through comprehensibility and entertainment, where 'success' was measured through popular turnout.

The 2016 *Biennale* directed by Stephanie Rosenthal touted itself as a science-fiction bonanza. With little consideration of nationality it paid some lip service to "immigration politics"<sup>4</sup> and was also unusual for a non-Australian curator in its non-tokenistic treatment of Australian artists, although they all appeared to have been chosen from the usual roll-call of a small number of key domestic commercial galleries. This *Biennale* was still off-balance from the previous iteration in 2014 which had the first Australian curator in some time (Juliana Engberg). The 19th *Biennale of Sydney*, *You Imagine What You Desire*, both a miscellany of newcomers and the curator's longtime associates, employed "entertainment as a tactic" — a strategy surprising for its positioning of entertainment at a premium; many of the works had a staged, set-piece quality like unmanned theatre sets, abeyant for something to happen when nothing much really did. In retrospect, however, one could say that the curator's intentions, unimpressive as they were, were made clear from the outset. Not so this 21st *Biennale*:

*Superposition: Equilibrium and Engagement.* While the dominant tone struck by Stephanie Rosenthal’s “immigration politics” (albeit displaced: the very real and grisly contemporary predicament was figuratively juxtaposed against the questionable dream of populating Mars), Kataoka’s take on the ongoing world crisis was dispatched in one work only. What the curator was attempting here was difficult to ascertain, its confused rationale matching its opaque title—and an attempt to parse that title goes nowhere. In her curatorial statement, Kataoka stated her *Biennale*,

*examines the world today by borrowing the word ‘superposition’, the quantum mechanical term that refers to an overlapping situation. Microscopic substances like electrons are said to be dualistic in nature: they paradoxically exist in the form of waves and granular particles simultaneously. The state of ‘superposition’ lies across all conceptual levels: from different climates and cultures to views of nature and the cosmic orders, conceptions of Mother Earth and interpretations of land ownership, readings of human history and conditions, the history of modern and contemporary art and the meaning of abstractions. The 21st Biennale of Sydney offers a panoramic view of how they all come together in a state of ‘equilibrium’, while delving into the workings of individual phenomena, considering the equivalence of these opposing notions through the lens of ‘engagement’.*<sup>5</sup>

Much has changed since the conceits and prolix pantomimes of the 1980s, but this was heady stuff, challenging in one’s attempt to make sense of it. It might be supposed that the world, so conceived against nostalgic and neo-spiritualist terms like “Mother Earth”, exists as a series of two or more layers that nonetheless are in some kind of balance (“equilibrium”) while at a same time dynamic (“engagement”); the presumption left to the viewer was that the objective correlative to this maelstrom of abstractions lay in the works themselves. The concluding statement presents little ambiguity as to the coarseness of intentions or the presumptiveness of the curatorial vision: “By placing these artworks, oriented towards diverse concerns and issues which resonate with overall perspectives of the *Biennale* on multiple levels, across seven venues in the city of Sydney, it is my hope that the *Biennale* as a whole will serve as a microcosm of the history of Earth, the human race, and a condensed version of the history of Sydney.”<sup>6</sup> Resuscitating the totalising aims of modernism and the sweeping ambitions of imperialism, the “overall perspectives of the *Biennale*” are addressed on “multiple levels”. Apparently, this is an Earth, a human race and a condensed version of history without almost all of North and South America, North Africa, the Middle East, and more.

*Superposition* appeared immediately after Kataoka’s major 2017 survey exhibition in Tokyo, *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1982 to Now*, lauded as the most ambitious engagement of Southeast Asian contemporary art of its kind—but in its scale and ambition it was already compromised, for it was in danger of exoticising and orientalising itself in the effort to assert its own difference from the Euro-American sphere.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it had to reconsider the historic differences that Japan had asserted over its neighbours that emanated from the Second World War. In many ways it not only exposed the difficulties of a hegemonic voice of any major exhibition expected to be seen as a survey, but it also highlighted the problematic nature of the large exhibition structure. Ironically enough, it is a structure that may be otiose and unsuited to global culture. It may suit its vastness, but not its plurality. The large exhibition will inevitably return to generalisations that may be congenial to corporate sponsors but irksome to the cultures they ostensibly represent.

So it is in this context that it might be further contemplated what was it the *21st Biennale of Sydney* sought to achieve? The curatorial aims laid out were simply too esoteric, while one relatively consistent aspect was that it did have an interest in making, process and the language of craftsmanship. This could be related to the Japanese tradition of the language of things: matter, colour and form. In many instances, if viewed with a sympathetic eye, it could be seen to be saying that despite the lenses through which Asia is perceived, there is still a distinctive materiality to its cultures that, while always overlapping, presents a different resonance from the European or American. This reads like a commonplace, or truism, but the prevalence of the virtual image, the way we travel across digital realms, causes us to forget the dimension of sensory difference from culture to culture, and the basic differences of the way cultures approach the material world. Perhaps it was at this point, although not articulated, that we may begin to consider what is distinct about one culture or another. That is, to retreat into the world of things that coexist and which are often eclipsed by the world of ideas. "Identity," the overused byword for contemporary art, is grounded in matter. This is not to argue for the bogus neoconservatism of "new materialism", rather to look at place and belonging in a simplified way. The danger of art transacting a language of matter, however, is that these things are readily translated into commodities.

This coincidence of materiality, identity and ideology found its embodiment in one artist. If there was anything to be learned from this *Biennale* it was the way in which identity can be caricatured in the archaic sin of idolatry. Here Asia and Asian difference appeared packaged in the guise of Ai Weiwei. Despite having spent twelve years in New York and now resident in Berlin, Ai's brand is that of the quintessence of activism, the apogee of Asian *engagement*. To foreground Ai at the expense of seemingly everyone else was an ambiguous wager—he dominated media attention such that one could be forgiven for thinking that the rest of the artists were just mere superimposed satellites.

Artistic celebrity is much like any other kind of cynosure, as those who have it must weigh up its abuses and entitlements. If there are certain acts undertaken with impunity, there are others that effect disproportionate scrutiny and criticism. His example (and his largest artwork for this *Biennale*) was also an apposite case study to ponder what today constitutes good political art. It is a question that calls for indefinite renewal, together with the changes in contemporary politics. Activist art is clearly not the same as it was in the 1960s, not only in its import, but in its audience and measurable effectiveness. Ai, who has made a reputation of political agitation and been held in detention by the Chinese government, is one of the so-called 'untouchables' of the art world (discounting Cindy Sherman, all of whom are men). In the words of Charlotte Higgins writing in *The Guardian* in 2013, he "outdoes even Andy Warhol in his ubiquity, his nimbleness at self-promotion and his use of every medium at his disposal to promulgate his work and his activism."<sup>8</sup> Since being allowed to leave China (after his incarceration), this activity has continued unabated. His increasing celebrity is not only courtesy of unabated media attention and through his blog, but escalates to other ventures such as a play about his detention by English playwright, Howard Brenton, staged in the Hampstead Theatre in London in 2011.

Celebrity has the uncanny ability to confound cause and effect, as many notables famous for their notoriety have demonstrated. Ai's fame derives from what he has done in the past (and purportedly what has been done to him), but now what he does is automatically exalted. The essential component to the Ai Weiwei brand is speaking out against the oppression of others. There is nothing extraordinary or untoward about this in the first instance, from the point of view



of any artist. The logical problem is however, that no one can be a spokesperson for everyone. The conceptual and material concerns of most artists begin and end with their immediate surroundings—indigenous, adopted or imposed—speaking on behalf of others can be a privilege at best; worst, a presumption. In addition to his highly-publicised film, *Human Flow* (2017) first presented last year at the *Venice Film Festival*, and *Crystal Ball* (2017) (placed upon a pile of refugee lifejackets), the *piece de resistance* was the gargantuan black lifeboat, *Law of the Journey* (2017), sixty metres in length, filled with generic black figures (refugees) fabricated from the same synthetic material. Installed on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour, there was no escaping its generalising message concerning global refugee-ism. The work's scale matched that of the artist's celebrity. Certainly, the refugee crisis is real and ongoing, and Ai helps make it so—it is certainly modish for artists to graft their concerns onto such situations for the presentation of their own political agenda. Both *Law of the Journey* and *Human Flow* are large-scale operations outside the purview of all but the most financially successful and critically 'loved' artists. The refugee dilemma unfortunately, along with countless other world crises, will ensure that some artists will be busy with such mega-works drawing from the world's sorrows for some time to come.

In his essay 'Commitment', Theodor Adorno pits the "committed" artist—*l'artiste engagé*, the engaged artist—against a truer and more authentic artist whose commitment is to art itself. Adorno argues that art too obsessed by the causes it serves will lapse as quickly as when the cause is no longer relevant and falls from memory.<sup>9</sup> While perhaps a too rigid formula, Adorno's proposition does serve as a corrective for an artist like Ai Weiwei whose brand of commitment conspires with another Adornian concept, the "culture industry". Ai's attempt to conquer the world through art is another form of expansionism, waged in reverse through compassionate principles. His appeal to Asianess is a corrective to any Asian (or otherwise) artist or curator, now and hence. By default rather than design, the *Biennale of Sydney* suggested that under the din of hegemonic Euro-American discourse, one way of representing difference is through the base matter, through recourse to something unutterable and inviolable.

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And finally a most important interrogatory, what is the relevance of this twenty-first *Biennale of Sydney* in comparison to those before it, and what is its status in the Southeast-East Asian region of which Australia politically and desiringly supposes it is a 'part'? Kataoka was the first Asian curator in the forty-five year history of the *Biennale*, which never ceases reminding us, is one of the most longstanding in the world. With this continual mantra, it was also illogically the first without a printed catalogue, perhaps the first such instance from any 'longstanding' major global biennale. This was a glaring omission if not miscalculation, given that a room at the Art Gallery of New South Wales was devoted to the history of the *Biennale*, which included its legacy of catalogues. Traditionally, these have been an important archive unto themselves and a cultural resource that can be held in libraries internationally. A relatively weak *Biennale* was thus rendered weaker still, consigned to an unsound digital memory.

What Kataoka's presence did open up once again was the vexed issue of the situatedness of cultural difference, and the more pertinent viable approach of the *Biennale*, an examination of which did not seem to hold any interest. If there could be said to have been any cultural reflection, it was in what had been elided, both in the artistic demographic and in the very absence of any





philosophical or culturally strategic thinking. But its recourse to cosmological obscurity and a profusion of polysyllabic words was by no means a solution to a consequential key consideration. Does the ongoing presence of the *APT* absolve the need for the question to be raised again about Australia's geographical position adjacent to Asia? Whether Australasia is an autonomous continent or in truth belonging to greater Asia is a distinction where the ideological and the geographical are constantly blurred. (Running concurrent with the *Biennale* was the exhibition *The Sleeper Awakes* at White Rabbit, the Sydney private museum dedicated to contemporary Chinese art, of some of China's leading contemporary artists: Xu Bing, Feng Mengbo, Wang Ningde and Liu Xiaodong, with biennale-quality artworks reflecting upon a society where unprecedented freedom, ambition and optimism *coexist* uneasily with anxiety, isolation and ubiquitous state surveillance, highlighting *Superposition's* deficiencies in 'Asian art', in what was perceived prior to its presentation as providing the possibility, if not necessity, for an Asia-connecting *Biennale of Sydney*.) The Australian culturati need only look over its near horizon to see the looming, rapidly developing international profile and global pull of biennales in major Asian cities, such as Singapore, Shanghai, Taipei and Gwangju, and more. (Press at the time of writing showed that this *Biennale of Sydney* was of scant interest in Asia.)

To say that Australia is of the southern hemisphere (and might warrant a curator from, for example South America, just as justifiably) is to miss the point entirely. To argue that globalisation renders considerations of the meanings accruing to geographical location redundant, is also naïve. It is also intellectually irresponsible, as it is an argument that can settle any geographical and cultural quandary. Yet another appointment of an artistic director to safeguard Euro-American perspectives would not only spell disaster for the *Biennale* but would conceivably have a deleterious effect on Australian art and artists themselves, for it would present a bias that they do not share. At the time of writing it was announced that the artistic director for the 2020 *Biennale* will be the internationally-

exhibited Australian indigenous artist, Brook Andrew. He is not the first indigenous artistic director however. Gerald McMaster, who with Catherine de Zegher co-curated the 18th *Biennale, All Our Relations*, is of the Blackfoot and Plain Cree First Nations people from Canada. Like Andrew, he is also an artist, although his practice has been overshadowed by his writing and curatorial work, which includes Edward Poitras' contribution to the Canadian Pavilion at the 1995 *Venice Biennale*. Andrew's relatively prominent position as an artist begs scrutiny as to issues regarding partisanship and conflicts of interest. It is precisely because of such unavoidable de facto concerns that were, one can assume, considered by McMaster to lead an ethical curatorial approach. There are no shortage of competent indigenous curators in Australia, many of whom also have longstanding national and international records. If the appointment of an Asian female artistic director was not an opportunity pressed to its fullest in 2018, it is hoped that the same disappointment will not eventuate with the *Biennale's* next iteration in 2020.

The unpalatable truth is this: art, as we have come to understand it in the presence sense and tense, is driven by commercial markets. Contemporary art not-for-sale is enabled by healthy economies – financial, cultural etc. Art pretends to maintain a sanitised distance from money, and everyone plays along accordingly. But Australia's market is principally Asia. An always growing proportion of its population identify to some degree with Asia. Unfortunately, there is the sense – concretely unverifiable for reasons that should be fairly evident – that the *Biennale of Sydney's* affinity with Asia is episodic, passing, and a matter of lipservice to the apprehension of diversity. Rather, it might be better seen as the possibility for the opening up of cultural markets and the possibility for the *Biennale* to renew itself, as all large organisations, culturally or financially, must.<sup>10</sup> Under the rubric of “the third oldest biennale in the world” Sydney might jettison its air of (Euro-American) prestige and resolve that from Asia it still has a lot to discover, and learn.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Being Lebanese installation artist Rayyane Tabet, who presented a limited number of performances over a five day period at the beginning of the *Biennale*, similarly a number of ten minute performances by English artist Oliver Beer, along with the much vaunted but embarrassing ‘Keynote Address: Ai Weiwei in conversation with Mami Kataoka’ and the screening of Ai's *Human Flow*, all at the Sydney Opera House; and the Nick Waterlow Memorial Lecture by René Block

<sup>2</sup> There is a venerable and largely unspoken repetitious patten of the way artists are chosen by overseas curators who have hitherto shown little interest or investment in Australian art. That is, they are selected according to three main channels. The first is ad hoc word of mouth where the sponsors and benefactors (with vested interests) get the most attention. The second is through an equally ad hoc process of who has been discussed and represented in local or international printmedia. The third is when the overseas curator does his or her obligatory ‘national tour’ from commercial gallery to commercial gallery, being regaled and feted in the process

<sup>3</sup> <https://theartlife.com.au/2006/biennale-of-sydney-2006-zones-of-contact/>; accessed 21 March 2018

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/archive/20th-biennale-of-sydney/>; accessed 15 March 2018

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/archive/21st-biennale-of-sydney/>; accessed 15 March 2018

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Flores, ‘Difficult Comparisons: The Curatorial Desire for Southeast Asia’, *di’van | A Journal of Accounts* 3, 2017, pp. 62-89

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Higgins, ‘Ai Weiwei shows Venice Biennale his many sides’, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/may/30/ai-weiwei-venice-biennale>; accessed 19 March 2018

<sup>9</sup> Theodor Adorno, ‘Commitment’, Frederic Jameson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics*, London and New York: Verso, 1977, pp. 177-195

<sup>10</sup> As did the Transfield company in 2014