

ANDREW RENTON | BROOK ANDREW

No Centre or Periphery: *Powerful Objectives*



ANDREW RENTON

NIRIN inherited considerable impedimenta in relation to the history of the Biennale of Sydney. Your appointment changed the rulebook in terms of being not only the first Australian Indigenous Artistic Director but also the first artist to take on the role, presenting a huge responsibility and expectation. It begs the question, for whom, and by whom? We can break down these distinctions later. But I wanted to begin by offering an impression of how the Biennale of Sydney appeared, from the perspective of someone who is not Australian, but has been regularly engaged as an art critic and curator for thirty years and observing the Biennale both from close up and afar.

The remit of the Biennale has inevitably changed over the decades. Perhaps one way to understand that legacy is to see the early editions given the job of importing culture from afar. With much heavy lifting, but rarely an attempt to disrupt any hierarchies, the Biennale nevertheless served to bring the ‘stuff’ of art, and all its materiality, into Australia. Of course, there was always contextualisation and a strong local presence; an ambitious gathering and internationalism. But the model is inherently fraught with problems. Even adopting the Italianate styling of the event reveals deep-seated agendas. Biennale of Sydney Board Chairman Franco Belgiorno-Nettis was clearly more than nostalgic for his homeland when formulating the first edition in 1973. John Coburn’s poster for the opening edition, for example, was symptomatic of an indebtedness to European modernism (Matisse?). And by 1976, the title of the Biennale was ‘Recent International Forms in Art’, where the word “international” seems to be trying too hard. In 1979 the agenda was ‘European Dialogue’. Artistic Director Nick Waterlow’s bold decision was to exclude the over-represented—North America—in favour of prioritising Aboriginal painting in context. ‘European Dialogue’, here, was almost ironic, and conscious of a need to map out complex versions of the contemporary as they would be read in Australia.

Although early Biennales of Sydney were Australia-centric, often for pragmatic reasons, there was an anxiety of ‘the elsewhere’. The Biennale archives reveal tireless efforts in a pre-digital moment to recontextualise established work, commission new work, and crucially, bring artists into the Australian art milieu, however briefly. For me, the question with biennials or large scale projects of any kind, is not what you managed to ship from A to B (although getting things to Sydney was always going to be a huge achievement), but more importantly, what you are able to leave behind after the party. The Biennale of Sydney certainly has a cumulative legacy, but it retains that structural challenge of all such events where the wheel has to be reinvented every two years.

With *NIRIN*, I feel you were attempting to do something quite different and you changed the rules. Beginning with the Welcome to Country¹ on Cockatoo Island, where Muggera dancers performed in front of Australian Indigenous artist Tony Albert’s *Healing Land, Remembering Country* (2020), I perceived a strong sense of the exhibition as host. It’s an obvious enough point and such opening ceremonies are the norm for Australian cultural events today. But large-scale international events aren’t necessarily seen through such an ethical act of hosting, accommodation and hospitality. The historical agenda might have been to expand and consolidate a canon, which is infinitely accommodating, nevertheless ending up with a display built up from quite a narrow set of perspectives, however fashionable. This isn’t so much a criticism of the curatorial positions taken but is a persistent reminder of structural constraints.

NIRIN, meanwhile, opened itself up to the way it looks further afield. Its international perspective began from a grounding, a definition of local terms, defining territories and their limits, while simultaneously mining both ancient and colonial histories. This felt politically and conceptually new. And it looked different. There was an engagement with international expectations and the languages of contemporary practice, while simultaneously recognising a complex set of expectations for local audiences and newly constituted viewing communities. There were new locations with which to engage and artists moved from one location to another, redefining their practice in relation to the challenges and rewards of context. How did you develop your ideas for what you believed the Biennale should be?

BROOK ANDREW

NIRIN was always going to be artist and First Nations led, underpinned by a strong advocacy for a First Nations philosophical context, initiated by the word “NIRIN”, which means ‘edge’ in my Wiradjuri language. This doesn’t mean that non-Indigenous artists in the Biennale couldn’t understand or embrace the themes. First Nations philosophy draws from deep history and connection to place and more recent manifestations like the terminology “blak/blakness” coined by Australian Indigenous artist Destiny Deacon; blak is a self-empowering self-labelling action of pride.

Being artist and First Nations led meant that things became simultaneously easier but also just as wild and complicated. Artists such as Arthur Jafa and Gina Athena Ulysse were curious about the Australian Indigenous context and experience, but they didn’t enter it through a singular Eurocentric vision. Most perceptions of Australia from international artists’ experience were different to conventional ideas about what an artist and Indigenous or First Nations person is. The politics of colour and representation will always be there. During installation, there was even one artist of colour who expressed that *NIRIN* was just like other biennales, a ‘white’ biennale, while simultaneously revelling in the Australian Indigenous ceremonial experience. This comment reflects the legacy of the biennale model embedded in the colonial world exhibition. *NIRIN* wasn’t about fixing things, it was about exposing and complicating and giving renewal and healing, making space for change that also highlighted urgent issues of the environment and sovereignty.

In regard to how I developed my ideas, it was definitely from a place of handing over the process of exhibiting in *NIRIN* to the artist, but to also inform the Biennale staff about this process. There were deep and lengthy conversations about the right place for their artworks, the right ceremonial or cultural considerations, the fact that some artworks could only be activated through song or private ceremonial activities, such as works by Eric Bridgeman, FAFSWAG and Blacktown Native Institution.

How a work was placed within historical collections, such as in the Art Gallery of New South Wales Old Court Galleries, necessitated a discussion with artists and venue curators to consider how to challenge the European and colonial Australian paintings and sculpture on permanent display, and the architecture of the Gallery. I invited Emily Karaka to reflect upon the juxtaposition of her paintings with those of nineteenth century artist, Eugene von Guérard (best known for his large-scale romantic paintings of Australian landscapes). When she saw this placement ‘in the flesh’, her eyes widened, and she felt ‘heard’. As senior elder and leader of the land rights movement in Aotearoa (the Māori name for New Zealand), her paintings are metaphorical x-rays of the von Guérards. With Arthur Jafa’s video installation *White Album* (2018-19) placed in the Schaeffer Gallery, the juxtaposition links the past with the present, creating a formidable connection with

history paintings such as Sir Edward John Poynter's *The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon* (1890). Similarly, Bronwyn Katz's beautifully haunting sound and sculptural work (based on her family's South African First Nations language) adjacent to numerous European paintings, including one of King Henry VIII from the Anglo-Netherlandish workshop. There is a sense of new and clear lines of connection through time that are not drawn by the eye of the 'Colonial Hole' (the authority of History Paintings or European landscape conventions). These new connections were made in collaboration with the artists and assistants, the Biennale and venue staff; my agenda was always about dismantling and shifting the gaze. Artists such as Laure Prouvost and Joël Andrianomearisoa created site-specific works that even challenged their own practices—everyone was ready and worked like demons, they were inspired by their own limitations and new possibilities. With great gusto, Laure Prouvost said to me that the space on Cockatoo Island was the hardest she has ever created in, and this is saying something after her presentation at the 2019 Venice Biennale.

Artists and collectives who were new to the biennale circuit and are driven by cultural responsibilities, such as the Tennant Creek Brio Collective, Mayun Kiki, BE Collective and Shaheed /Witness/Kashmir Collective, were determined to ensure their artworks were presented, maintained and experienced in ways that they were proud of—I was there to assist them and be their advocate to make sure their artworks were produced and presented in ways they had not experienced before. Ibrahim Mahama and Nicholas Galanin took on the challenges that biennales often throw at artists, gracefully and thoughtfully shifting and adapting in ways that were very respectful, attributes I would say reflect their personal cultural lives just as much as being well-known artists.

This flexibility and adaption were inspiring, with Nicholas Galanin ultimately creating *Shadow on the Land, an excavation and bush burial* (2020) which transplanted the shadow of the Captain Cook statue at Hyde Park in central Sydney into the grass landscape of Cockatoo Island. Initially, he wanted to dig into the grass at Hyde Park to directly challenge the historical monument. However, we were unable to secure permission. He then adapted the work for Cockatoo Island, and this actually deepened the concept, as the island is a fitting graveyard for the monument. Now this work is receiving international success, complementing the current activism around colonial and imperial statues. We also collaborated with other creatives, including poets Melanie Mununggurr and Elicura Chihuilaf Nahuelpan, whose words enhanced the rockface of Cockatoo Island and the façade of the AGNSW, respectively. The process-driven outcomes of *NIRIN* were informed by a Wiradjuri sensibility just as much as the cultural flexibility and openness from the artists and collectives; their messages were urgent and powerful. This was my aim, by fighting for a biennale structure that allowed all of the artists to self-represent. Some within the Biennale organisation didn't agree with or like the way I pushed this, but the Biennale wasn't theirs: it was the artists' and people's biennale.

When I was invited to become the Artistic Director of the 22nd Biennale of Sydney I thought this was an opportunity to look at the connections between the colonial legacies of the biennale structure and the trade in human remains and cultural objects. The so-called World Expositions, which were the precursor to the idea of 'the biennale', put on display, in often purpose-built grand structures, objects and remains looted from many locations around the world as augmented realities of societies from elsewhere. In most cases these displays, which at times even included living peoples, sustained racist theories of primitivism, the legacies of which I believe need to be smashed. The artists and collectives who I chose for *NIRIN* have been smashing it! This is apparent in many of the biennale works that focus on how bodies are represented, for example:

in the artworks of Zanele Muholi; the 15 Screens presentation which featured video artworks by Moara Brasil and Ana Beatriz Domingues including intimate footage of Brazilian Indigenous women meeting and rallying for human rights; and Sammy Baloji's X-ray scans of museum cultural objects printed on mirrors that reflect the bodies of viewers. Léuli Eshraghi, Colectivo Ayllu, S.J. Norman, Lhola Amira and Jota Mombaça also focused on the body in different ways: on its future and the self-empowering and collective healing of the queer and spiritual Indigenous and Black body, through ceremony and protocol. These kinds of representations and expression are important to reflect on when in the Western artworld, the body is often colonised and very gendered.

ANDREW RENTON

I like what you say about "dismantling and shifting the gaze." You've mapped out several overlapping strategies at work in the Biennale. Maybe we can dig a little deeper into some of these, for example, Londel Innocent's polemical t-shirt as touchstone, which read, "The Only Primitivism is Eurocentrism."

As an aside, from where I'm writing, at my locked-down, post-Brexit British desk, a Eurocentric vision has a different resonance today, and many of us are mourning a separation that highlights another layer of unresolved complexities. At this time of writing, we are beginning to see a formal undoing of centuries-old presumptions as colonial monuments are toppled and rolled away; for example, the statue of the seventeenth-century slave trader Edward Colston, in Bristol. Nicholas Galanin's proposal for Captain Cook's monument, *Shadow on the Land, an excavation and a bush burial* (2020) sets an agenda in terms of what could be done with these things once they've been dismantled. This in turn inspires consideration of some of the immutable artefacts that might have needed to be set aside if the Biennale was to be viable as a format again. Your critique of that Eurocentrism begins with the infrastructure itself, where and how art gets seen. Site is always an issue, location always political, and you move seamlessly between those established venues, such as the AGNSW in the city centre and the one-hour journey to Campbelltown Art Centre located in Western Sydney, far from the downtown Sydney culture trail.

It begins for me outside the AGNSW, setting the agenda with Elicura Chihuailaf Nahuelpán's poem² and moves inside to dismantle assumptions of the museum's legacy. The building was always a challenge waiting for you to do this. There is this greatest-hits name checking on the facade of the building: Giotto, Raphael Titian, Rembrandt, Murillo, etc. All the more ironic, problematic, when we observe that the building opened in 1897 with the title The National Art Gallery of New South Wales over the door. Nationhood then, defined in a puzzling allegiance to an already appropriated culture, very far away indeed. And even more extraordinary, the artists' names lettered in bronze are far from a celebration of British colonial legacies, but rather a manifestation of colonial ability to absorb histories within its canon, assuming ownership through some form of connoisseurship and the mediation of 'Grand Tour-ism'. But why rearticulate them here? What anxiety sets this abstracted gaze back towards a cultural authority over the seas towards Europe? Whose culture is prized?

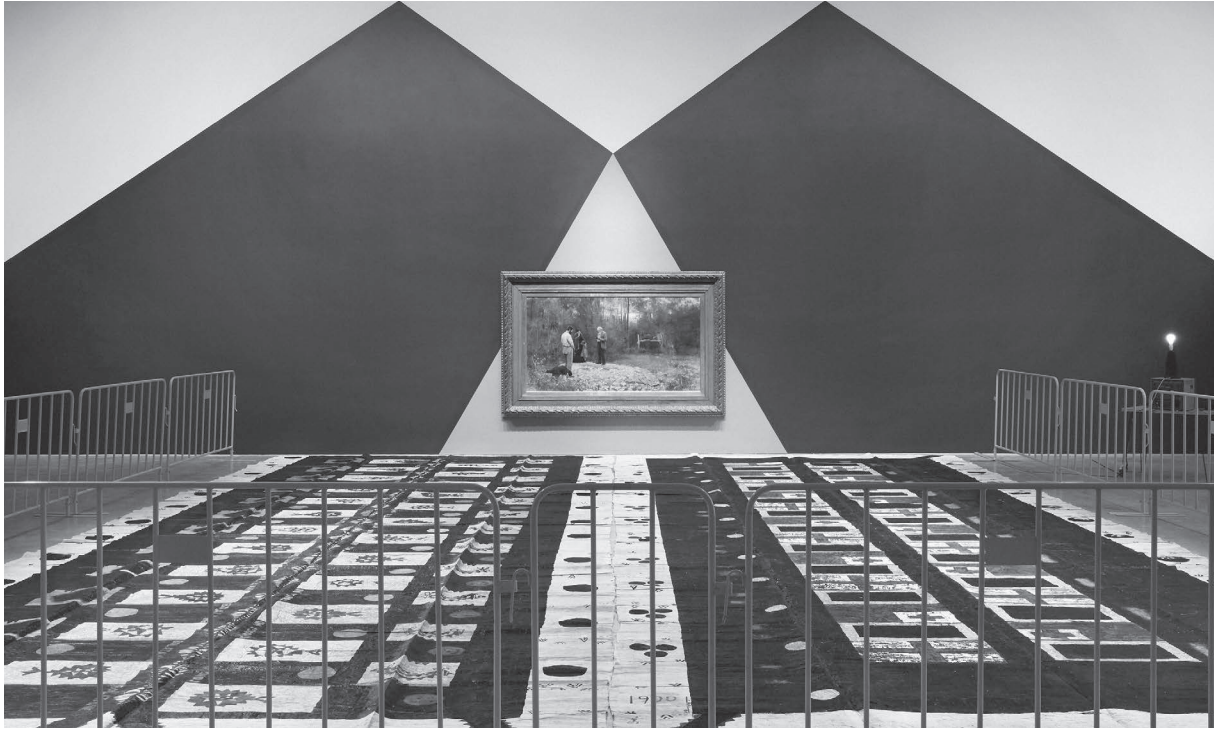
I'm focusing on the building because I think the achievement of *NIRIN* disrupts that anxiety, which is deep-seated, interrupting its histories and formalities by inviting work temporarily into its context. For the duration of the exhibition, things aren't quite where they are supposed to be. For the artworks you and the artists have integrated, this is obvious. Their installation is designed to cut across the permanent collection. But the artworks that have remained in place, unquestioned, for decades, now also start to feel out of place. Don't get me wrong, there's something reassuring

about knowing where to find that great Picasso in the AGNSW. The reiterated encounter is part of the experience of the museum. You experience it, remember it, with all its accrued surroundings. It consolidates the history, for better or worse. National collections of this type are as much about where they are collected as the sum of the individual works. But that Picasso is permanently changed when paintings by Emily Karaka, for example, are installed in the gallery. The intervention isn't about offering comparisons like for like, but obviously asserts difference. But in so doing these interpolations politicise every work in the space as well as the space itself. In this instance there's a double hosting, where you are engaging in a dialogue with artists, and at the same time collectively being hosted by the Gallery. It's courageous on the part of the museum, because it upsets its equilibrium. And while you might take for granted that the museum will revert to a prior order, there's an exchange which has taken place and the absence at the end of *NIRIN* will be, quite literally, marked.

This presents the question, which I think too few large-scale projects have as part of their remit: what happens next? It is especially relevant for the continuity of the Biennale of Sydney and its relationship with major institutions such as the AGNSW, and all venues for that matter. Is there something left behind cumulatively, that enables, or must it always be a case of reinventing the wheel? I'm engrossed with this because context is everything. Arthur Jafa's *The White Album* (2018-19), for example, becomes a different work in the AGNSW. Jafa might not have anticipated it, but his video installation agitated a mutual distraction in the space. More than re-articulating space, the surrounding collection is put under the microscope, because everything that enters this space is a form of critique. Even the light touch textile interventions of Joël Andrianomearisoa, *There Might be no Other Place in the World as Good as Where I am Going to Take You* (2020), are about marking the territory, temporarily veiling in order to make visible again. It's such a simple move, revealing the politics of motion through these spaces. What stops you in your tracks, what makes you look again at the over familiar, or makes you retrace countless journeys that have been made here before; marking, demarcating, the space?

The exhibition space is always fraught, more than ever. The AGNSW, for example, has been a regular venue for the Biennale since 1976, but I wonder about relationships. What type of hosting is at work here? I'm thinking about the ethics of hospitality that Derrida sets out, that it must be an unconditional hosting—in this instance, the yielding up of a small part of the institution's authority. I see this at work also at the Museum of Contemporary Art, but in a different way. Here, even the contemporary is always, already historicised—all about conjunctions, an honest and, here, confrontational, curatorial strategy—things that shouldn't go together questioning where the contemporary is located.

One of the most beautiful moments in the Biennale for me is Frederick McCubbin's painting *A bush burial* (1890) in its gold period frame, set into the wall work by Eric Bridgeman, adjacent to floor works by Kulimoe'anga Stone Maka. There's an economy to this, that doesn't require complex sets of knowledge or annotation to reveal itself. Negotiations of place, incompatible genres invested in landscape, where everything is out of place, here temporarily find a home. And Luca Giordano's baroque blockbuster, *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1672-74)—a key stop on that problematic Grand Tour, when it was in its former home in Vicenza—it knocks you out, in this context. You first see it through the projections of Aziz Hazara's *Bow Echo* (2019). All about place again—time, travel and place—both in terms of subject matter and the more challenging notion of where the physical work belongs. Here we can consider some of these strategies of conjunction and disruption, perhaps through your selection of Powerful Objects, which punctuate every venue, like stealth weapons.



BROOK ANDREW

Powerful Objects is a selection of ephemeral and cultural objects and documents from private and public collections shown across the many venues of *NIRIN*, including the McCubbin and Giordano paintings as well as a 3D print of a carved tree section or dendroglyph (grave trees) from Wiradjuri Country, scanned from the original object which continues to be housed at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. I conceive of these archives being in conversation with each other and the contemporary artworks in *NIRIN*, to invite new perspectives on intersecting histories. Powerful Objects have the power to shift history and our understanding of time when they are not contained or framed by the prevailing narratives but are rather presented through new juxtapositions of objects and artworks. I used this method in *NIRIN* as a way to pull apart certain objects from their supportive, dominant narratives, such as *The Rape of the Sabine Women* which is considered a quintessential Baroque painting. Rather than a regular museum display which emphasises periodisation, I wanted to experiment with how objects, and in this instance a painting, have their own power that cannot be contained by a museological framework. Placing this painting adjacent to Aziz Hazaar's epic video *Bow Echo* (2019) re-moulds and sets a different narrative, bringing into combined focus what are usually considered disparate histories and cultures, but are in fact interconnected.

Western concepts of time, that are so familiar through modes of science-fiction, deep space research and of course art history, need to be challenged, to open up to a multitude of other possibilities. Even unpacking 'does time travel really exist'? Can a worm hole or a black hole take us somewhere else at the speed of light, or faster? How are such questions answered through non-Western understandings of history and time. The Wiradjuri concept of time is ruled by a different set of pragmatic, spiritual, kinship and scientific cycles such as weather, seasons and ceremony, that synchronise human responsibilities to the earth and each other, and which are embedded with spiritual manifestations and beings (which includes song and dance) that interconnect us. Hence a corroboree ceremony³ could continue for three or more days. The corroboree might seem for those who have experienced it, untimed, unreliable or exciting, for the fact that it is flexible, i.e. it doesn't necessarily begin immediately at 4pm and finish three hours later. The cycles set here are managed by, for example, the *gaalmaldhaany* (composer/song maker) who is responsible for the ceremony. We have a saying in Wiradjuri (and many First Nation cultures) that "there is no time." A Western interpretation of this cultural philosophy is the belief that time has frozen First Nations peoples as being in the past, in a prehistory, that we are so uncivilised that we don't even understand feudal systems. This interpretation cannot grasp another mode of time that is not linear, and it can be so pervasive, or ideological, that regardless if one has mixed heritage, we can be tarnished by the same righteous condemnation as being primitive and hence incapable of functioning in the Western world. *NIRIN* challenges this, and some of its audience were threatened by this notion of difference and alternative model of time and history.

You mention Londel Innocent's polemical t-shirt 'The Only Primitivism is Eurocentrism.' This work was a surprise collaboration between Londel, Leah Gordon (co-curator of the Ghetto Biennale, Haiti) and myself. I coined the phrase when I was in Haiti doing research for *NIRIN*. Leah and I mused upon it and she secretly commissioned Londel to paint it as a gift to me. Londel spelt "primitivism" incorrectly which further, for me, disjointed the paradigm of colonialism, ripping the language root out. This process was a powerful example of how many artists and communities worked within *NIRIN*.

Elicura Chihuilaf Nahuelpán's poem banners between the pillars at the front of the AGNSW was as a gentle reminder (maybe most would have missed this) of the connection and intertwined responsibilities between humanity and the earth (all objects and living creatures, including stones), sited adjacent to the "greatest hits name-checking... Giotto, Raphael Titian," as you say "everything is out of place, temporarily finding a home."

This intervention continued inside, and in this sense, in the entire AGNSW building. The permanent collection was dismantled and re-mantled in shifting modes (it was like an enduring blur—it did not settle—it was aggravated and refused to be compliant). This is what I believe many of the artists in *NIRIN* are doing in their practices, they shift and move about, it is not anarchy, it is their world view. And if one comes from a dominant power, this shifting will terrify you. If anything, Nahuelpán's banners were a gentle warning of this structural delusion. As you say, "everything is out of place, temporarily finding a home." Absolutely! My aim was to dismantle in ways that were seen but also unseen, invisible, until one walked in and unravelled it in their own mind's eye. Some viewers understood it immediately and others only saw what they didn't want to see: that in this disturbance, disruption and disgruntlement the colonial order was being dismantled and 'disrespected'.

There is a real fear that the colonial powers that systemically exist within institutional structures, and those that hold the financial power, will somehow become irrelevant and collapse if such structures are overly challenged. This can be seen in the current global BLM movement reaching into Australia, where many see this as a human rights issue as well as wanting to unveil this systemic institutional control over ways of seeing, of being, and the denial of other cultural roots and histories that actually form, very powerfully, who we are as individuals and collective identities today.

Powerful Objects can be active in this process. They have their own memory, their own provenance and bound in ways that far exceed our understanding. This is because most of them are older than us, they were often created hundreds of years ago. Powerful Objects can change, they can change their minds and how they relate to us and what they mean in history, and we can change our minds about them. The challenge here is: are we allowing them to do this? Are they doing it anyway but most of us don't see it, or refuse it? Many people want objects in museums, especially those that were stolen during colonial exploits to be returned to their communities of origin. Recently the protest group, Les Marrons Unis Dignes et Courageux, led by African activist Mwazulu Diyabanza attempted to seize a nineteenth-century African funeral pole from the Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac in Paris. The group saw this as an act of "justice" because "most of the works were taken during colonialism."⁴ The group was arrested by security before it could leave the building with the pole, and the activists will appear in Paris court September this year.

One interesting aspect of this event is that some may see Mwazulu Diyabanza as a vigilante. Yet, encasing these Powerful Objects together in a museum is part of the disenfranchisement of people like Mwazulu who have been systematically ignored and romanticised. The objects speak to the cultures they belong to and some believe they are saying 'we want out, we want return'. It is this undeniably contested history that we need to reckon with in the contemporary moment. It is acts of bravery that these Powerful Objects demand from all of us. Slowly, institutions are taking this on, and the new director of the Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Emmanuel Kasarhérou faces the challenge of honouring the 2017 promise by President Emmanuel Macron to return sub-Saharan Africa's cultural heritage, of which Quai Branly holds some 70,000 pieces. Kasarhérou is a Kanak man who brings his background to this task and an understanding of both sides of the restitution debate: "I feel as much the descendant of people who were colonisers of a certain place as of people who were colonised."⁵

NIRIN is about a level playing field and the activation of all Powerful Objects from many parts of the world, including European paintings and First Nations cultural objects, to break the silence of what we feel inside, in our guts. The intention of presenting Powerful Objects alongside what is seen as more conventional arts such as video, painting and architecture is that they often reveal probing questions which confront the current state of play: why are many cultures not recipients of colonial institutional wealth? Why is there silence around particular traumatic histories? You mentioned the "anxiety of elsewhere" in Australia. Powerful Objects can highlight the problems of systemic racism still imbedded within the intergenerational psyche of many Australians and the institutions inherited from Britain. One of the Powerful Objects on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art gives evidence to a massacre event in Australia, hundreds of which occurred on the frontiers when the British invaded. This object is a letter to a friend and describes a massacre of Aborigines in Victoria's Western District, penned in December 1854 by James Dixon: "We had a great battle with them a month ago, there was eighteen killed and two of our men. They throws [sic] spears that penetrate right through you which is verry [sic] dangerous."

No Centre or Periphery: *Powerful Objectives*



This letter was identified in my research on the Frontier Wars⁶ and also links to the human remains trade that still haunts many Aboriginal peoples today. There is evidence of ancestral remains being collected in the aftermath of massacre events, and such remains were collected and studied as part of then pseudo-scientific studies of race and eugenics. The anatomist W.L.H. Duckworth dissected the brains of Aboriginal people to compare them with those from apes. Thousands of remains are still in many institutions overseas, such as the Duckworth Collection in the UK.⁷ It was these theories that justified barbarous acts and led to government policies that continue to impact on Aboriginal lives, as seen in disproportionate rates of incarceration and child removal. It needs to be understood that these primitivist values and forms of prejudice and racism found early expression in the intercolonial and world exhibitions that ‘trooped around’ Aboriginal and other Indigenous peoples’ remains and wrote a narrative that justified land exploitation and dispossession. These are not histories or realities that institutions or governments are proud of nor even properly educated about. You have asked me about the “strategies of conjunction and disruption, perhaps through your selection of Powerful Objects, which punctuate every venue, like stealth weapons”. I see the entire biennale structure, imported to Australia as a Powerful Object. I just climbed inside it, tinkered with it, set the time again, re-evaluated its operating systems, wound it up and let it go.

ANDREW RENTON

NIRIN seemingly anticipated the crescendo of decolonising, decentring and dismantling interventions which are questioning hundreds of major collections and public display strategies across the world. It set an agenda, which prefigured some of the dismantling, decolonising discourses, played out in public spaces and institutions throughout the world during lockdown, while it was closed. And perhaps, at the time of writing, there is now a new climate to receive the project given that it has reopened following the initial COVID-19 lockdown. I’m wondering what it looks like to you now with the benefit of an internal nostalgia and hindsight? Its issues haven’t changed, and they are consistent with the concerns which have always been visible in your own practice as an artist. But while it’s obvious to say that curating is a different practice from that of an artist, do you think that there’s a curatorial space that only an artist can establish? Is it an extension of art practice or are you presenting a quite different discipline?

I’m thinking about this because I want to explore the aesthetics of the exhibition within its political framework. It wouldn’t have the force without it, not just in the disrupting of spaces, but also the disrupting of established genres. The aesthetics lie somewhere between the works themselves which are always, by definition, dislocated, and the spaces you established for the installations. I’d like to know more about what could be “inverted” to use your phrase, in relation to many of these spaces? It’s clearly not a case of completely stepping outside of these sites. Is that even possible? My experience of moving through these locations was to be constantly reminded of where I was standing. It made viewing a political act. Nothing, nowhere, is without history. Perhaps the exception, institutionally, at least, was Campbelltown Arts Centre—that seemed to be a huge gesture, becoming a densely articulated site for learning. But what about Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour? I’ve always been troubled by it as a Biennale venue. It has the space and the ingredients for an ‘experience’, but it feels more charged than anywhere on the Biennale trail. As a consequence, it feels doubly problematic, as a site of sacred significance for the Eora peoples, but also one with a strongly colonial aesthetic embedded within the architecture itself. Did you find it problematic to work in these spaces, or was there some sense of reclaiming contested territory?

In relation to the aesthetics of the space, there's always a sense of works having to negotiate layer(s) of these histories. Does the negotiation get in the way of the artwork or offer new context? One remedy, in aesthetic terms at least, was the encounter of artists in more than one location. You've talked about this a little. I wonder if you could elaborate on the practicalities. You rarely see artists inhabiting more than one location in such large-scale projects. It's such a simple strategy, is useful in aesthetic terms, but in *NIRIN*'s case, it reads politically.

BROOK ANDREW

Now that *NIRIN* has reopened (it closed in March due to COVID-19) and with the current situation humanity finds itself in, urgently and feverishly confronted with re-setting human connections or exposing them, albeit via a virus or damaged histories that are being confronted and dismantled, the mess, as I have always called the fallout of colonialism and the mass destruction of the environment, is intensifying. I am not sure we are even near the eye of the coming storm. I say this because many are still in denial that humans have created this mess. *NIRIN* therefore is more confronting, more divisive and requires more healing and compassion. It is a time where people are visiting *NIRIN* and learning or being challenged or are feeling safe in its space. Artists are expressing their deepest and contentious thoughts for change or reflecting on present and future ways of building a better world. This is confronting to dominant cultures, no matter where they are in the West or East, it does not matter. Regarding my role as an artist, am I doing anything different to a curator? I see myself as a conduit and this is not bound by convenient terminologies. I am not expressing this to create a sense of smokescreen or moral positioning, I believe that not everything fits into a perfect translatable answer for one system. We need to be malleable and the more we bend and allow others to bend will create better systems that allow strength and greater responsibility; we cannot do this alone. I was not alone, though I did push the biennale bureaucratic system. It needed to be created through a First Nations philosophy of connection, and the Biennale of Sydney took on that challenge, even though there was some push back.

I was very conscious of the power of space too, of the venues' cultural, historical and architectural dimensions. This information was relayed to artists and communities involved in *NIRIN*. Many of them openly explored these aspects. It was always noted publicly and on the Biennale website and printed matter whose Aboriginal land the venues are on and that the spaces are safe spaces for people to be in. These principles, along with artist-led events, from openings to public programs drove a cultural and intellectual approach or methodology. At times this would challenge the bureaucracy of the venues and partner organisations. Many were surprised when we challenged the formalities that derive from British ceremony. For example, artists spoke before the Governor of NSW, in Government House, as well as across all venues. This imbedded sensibility also applied to the display of artworks. For example, I decided not to use plinths or regular museum furniture like ropes to separate the public from artworks or delicate objects. We used metal street barricades to protect the tapa by Kulimoe'Anga Stone Maka, and the installations by Nicholas Galanin and Latai Taumoepeau on Cockatoo Island. I employed hessian textile to create spatial divides across all venues, which was a way to reduce the use of painted or built walls. This worked environmentally but also softened the space and reduced the usual museum treatments. The hessian created a maze at Campbelltown Art Centre, and the only plinths was one employed as an art aesthetic with Sammy Baloji's installation which spoke to this museological practice, or for objects of great value and size such as the epergne created by colonial silversmith J. Henry Steiner (1835-1914) exhibited at the MCA.

Similarly, the presentation of large-scale videoworks by Erkan Özgen, Victoria Santa Cruz, Aziz Hazara, Denilson Baniwa and the Balfour footage (the 1949 removal of Aboriginal ceremonial trees in western New South Wales) were immersive and mostly unattached to the venue walls but configured through the interior space. This was the same for the presentation of videoworks by Barbara McGrady at the Campbelltown Arts Centre. Aesthetically speaking, I aimed for people to experience the bare bones of the venues' architecture where the artworks could be independent from the venues' structure, but also firmly placed within the interior spaces so as to make comment on the venue. The movement of people around these interventions was also important, to have different views and responsibilities to not only the artworks but to the spaces and also other people. It created a more complex relationship than the traditional art viewing experience of Western museums.

Together, the artists and I embraced the complexity of loaded venues and cultural spaces. It was an opportunity to discover how often set narratives can be re-read and re-configured through collaboration, exposure and exploration. Artworks by Lisa Reihana, Laure Provost, Anna Boghiguian and Gina Athena Ulysse at Cockatoo Island for example, were deep investigations of the island's spaces, both historically and architecturally. While other artists, like Paulo Nazareth, ArTree Nepal, Shaheed/Witness/Kashmir, Melanie Mununggurr, BE Collective, Jota Mombaça and Adrift Lab used the complex historical spaces on the island to connect with other historical and urgent contemporary understandings of the world. All venues were deep conduits to an international web of connections. Meandering around the island and making these connections through aesthetic moments that related to places such as Australia's Tennant Creek to Ghana to Brazil to Nepal, to Lord Howe Island and Kashmir assisted in a grounding of these collective aesthetics and histories.

The repetition of some artists works in multiple venues was a strategy to pull the experiences of each venue closer together, but to also make a firm statement that each artwork was not just a singular linear statement. For example, the issues brought up in Eric Bridgeman's work at the MCA and Cockatoo Island, Barbara McGrady at the AGNSW and Campbelltown Art Centre, or the work of Nahuelpán on the façade of the AGNSW and inside the MCA are echoes. They are different artworks but the echo effect assists in stitching the experiences together. I would say this is a more visceral than aesthetic responsibility – I like putting the audience under this pressure for after all, artists are constantly under this pressure.

Notes

¹ A Welcome to Country is a ceremony performed by traditional owners to welcome visitors to their country. The protocol acknowledges the specific Indigenous nation or language group on which an event takes place. There are over 250 Indigenous nations or language groups across Australia. See <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Welcome-to-and-Acknowledgement-of-Country.pdf>

² See image page 28 for the poem text

³ An Australian Aboriginal dance ceremony which may take the form of a sacred ritual, festive celebration or an informal gathering

⁴ See <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/quai-branly-protest-african-artifact-seized-activists-1202691064/>

⁵ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/arts/design/emmanuel-kasarherou-quai-branly-museum.html>

⁶ The Australian Frontier Wars is a term applied by some historians and others to violent conflicts between indigenous people and white settlers following the British colonisation of Australia

⁷ See <https://www.smh.com.au/national/notes-on-aboriginal-remains-on-ebay-20090529-bp6h.html>

No Centre or Periphery: *Powerful Objectives*

