



It 'May Be' Fantastic Again *The Biennale of Sydney*

Asian Art >
General

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By Thomas Berghuis

In the early 1970s the Italian-born founding chairman of the Transfield Holding Corporation, Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, personally took part in setting up and financing the Biennale of Sydney. By that time, international recurring exhibitions were scarce and the decision was made to model the Sydney Biennale on the Venice Biennale, the most renowned biannual art show at the time. From the start, Belgiorno-Nettis wanted to have people in Australia share his fascination for modern and contemporary art. His personal statements about visual art often inspire creativity and encourage people to take inspiration from the artworks shown at the Biennale. This year, under the title *(The World May Be) Fantastic*, the Biennale seems to continue to share Belgiorno-Nettis' fascination for the arts, although perhaps with a bit more caution.

This year, the Sydney Biennale chose to challenge its assertion of a 'fantastic' world by selectively casting a group of artists whose work could be easily placed in a unique and above all amaz-

(The World May Be) Fantastic is the title given to the thirteenth Biennale of Sydney that took place at different venues around the city and aimed to capture the imagination of the public who had come to Sydney in large numbers to see this international showcase of artworks and performances by a range of artists, including a small but significant group of artists from Asia. In 1973, the Sydney Biennale was born out of the Transfield Art Prize for contemporary Australian art. It has since grown into an important recurring event for the city of Sydney and its local artist community, which includes a growing number of artists who have come from Asia.

Both photo's:
Cang Xin,
Communication
Series



Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, 2002

ing spectacle. Spread over key locations in the central business district, and particularly around the Circular Quay and the harbour, the organization chose for the participating venues not to be too far apart for this year's event. Two years ago, the 2000 Sydney Biennale was turned into a citywide event and included not just the six recurring venues, but also a wide range of supporting exhibitions and satellite events. One wonders why the organization decided to change this concept suddenly by not expanding this year's event into the greater city. It seems that this time, and as a result of opening up only a limited space, one of the main official venues – the Museum of Contemporary Art – was literally packed with artworks, including many poorly projected and installed video

installations, scattered over different floors. After a few hours in the exhibition, having walked past all of the artworks, many visitors seem somewhat relieved when they make it to the exit. As if they reach the conclusion that the world outside may indeed be more fantastic.

Overall, the set-up of the 2002 Biennale bears proof of a lack of inspiration and any type of 'fantastic' curatorial vision. Too much emphasis seems to have been placed on hosting a travelling exhibition, rather than creating an international event that has an impact on the entire city, as one would expect from a Biennale. Perhaps the use of alternative spaces is important when creating an international art event in a large city such as Sydney. It may even offer the

opportunity to expand the representation of artists, and in particular, the representation of artists and their works from outside Europe and North America. The 2002 Sydney Biennale again seems to confirm that a small and powerful group of art mediators work together to circulate an increasingly 'exclusive' set of Asian artists and their works. These mediators give the impression that they want to set up a new quasi-market for these works, which operates entirely on the basis of transnational reappearance. With the New York-based artist Do-Ho Suh representing Korea, the Tokyo-born artist Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba representing Vietnam, and the L.A.-based artists Yutake Sone and Miwa Yanagi together representing Japan, the Asian participation at the Sydney Biennale seems to have been focused on artists who were already well represented elsewhere. Therefore, it seems the Biennale attempts to further boost this year's popular charts, following the charts of the 2001 Venice Biennale, the 2001 Yokohama Triennial, and the Neo-Tokyo exhibition that was held in late 2001 at the MCA in Sydney.

One surprising newcomer to the scene of international recurring art exhibitions was the Beijing-based performance artist Cang Xin. In particular his live performance at the Casula Powerhouse Museum, about an hour's drive from the city centre, had great visual

impact. In this performance, which is part of his ongoing *Communications Series*, Cang Xin was dug into a hole in the ground and had the audience give him objects for him to lick. Later that same week, Cang Xin staged two similar types of performances at the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, but in both cases his proposal to be buried into a hole in the ground was disapproved by the inner city council. Only at Casula was the performance allowed as it was intended. Therefore, despite the suburban museum not being part of the official list of venues for the 2002 Sydney Biennale, these satellite events should at least be mentioned as they show the real importance that a recurring art exhibition has in creating a wide range of platforms for artists to develop their work and interact with local communities throughout the city. Inviting the greater city to participate also means attracting additional financial support from the different local councils. Therefore, by allowing for new spaces to be part of the event, the next Biennale 'may be' fantastic again. ◀

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