

JODIE DALGLEISH

The Biennial as a Form of Contradiction: The 16th Biennale of Sydney, ‘Revolutions – Forms That Turn’

Abstract

Large-scale international biennials of contemporary art continually present an excess of art and information within the realm of cultural tourism rather than art history. As a result, they resist scholarly analysis, particularly in terms of ‘form’. However, a kind of discourse has emerged around the ‘problems’ or ‘paradoxes’ of biennials, and common themes relating to opposing or contradictory forces have emerged. These themes provide the basis of a provisional framework of contradictions or ‘dialectics’ by which biennials can be analysed and discussed. This article presents four dialectical ‘themes’ in relation to The 16th Biennale of Sydney, ‘Revolutions – Forms That Turn’: modernity and postmodern critique; the paradox of ‘place’ as both local and global, being global while questioning ‘globalisation’; and the autonomy and politicality of art. The analysis provides insight into curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s dedication to ‘dialectical play’ within the 16th Biennale of Sydney (described as the practice of exploring and heightening an individual’s experience of contradiction). Further, the potential for both curatorial work and biennials to provide unresolved ‘in-between’ spaces for inventiveness and new dialogue becomes more apparent.

In surveying the literature on large-scale international biennials produced in recent years, it quickly becomes apparent that the biennial phenomenon resists sustained analysis according to any particular methodology or intellectual approach.¹ Art historian James Meyer made a comparable observation at a conference on the future of biennials convened by the Venice Biennale in 2005, where he identified a dearth of scholarly analysis that may be attributed to the considerable geographic spread of biennials, their temporal and popularised nature, and the ‘proliferative abundance’ of art and information they generate beyond the locus of academia.² Although Meyer’s observations were astute, I am further struck by the constant references to ‘problems’, ‘tensions’ or ‘paradoxes’ of biennials by more or less advocatory critics, curators, and academics throughout the extant literature.³ These problems have often appeared to become the focus of discussion and debate, precluding more paradigmatic analysis of the *form* of such international exhibitions.⁴ Even discussions as to what a biennial *is* have been seemingly displaced by endless iterations of their ‘problems’. This is in part encouraged by biennials’ inherent resistance to the development of any kind of authoritative framework, and their often heterogenous and ‘contradictory’ modes of operation.

In light of such resistance, I offer the following framework provisionally in a bid to set things in motion. Despite the lack of academic analysis, it is possible to identify a

¹ Although the number of biennials existing at any one point in time is unknown, in 2005 Geeta Kapur stated that 110 had been counted (Kapur, 2007, p. 301). Uncertainty regarding the number of biennials is partly due to the current elasticity of the term ‘biennial’. In this text I am concerned with larger-scale biennials of contemporary art with an international scope or profile.

² Meyer, 2007, pp. 138-143. Which is not to preclude the rare cases in which biennials have provided some form of historical narrative: Alloway, 1968; Glasmeier and Stengel, 2005; and Vanderlinden and Filipović, 2005.

³ For example, less advocatory texts considered indicative include: Stallabrass, 2004; Townsend, 2003; and Vanderlinden and Filipović, 2005; as well as Schjeldahl, 2002, p. 94; Verhagen, 2005, pp. 1-4; Rugoff, 1999, pp. 46-49; and Jones, 2006, pp. 91-92. Key advocatory texts include: Basualdo, 2003-4, pp. 50-61, and Enwezor, 2004, pp. 6-31.

⁴ Meyer also advocated consideration of the biennial form. Meyer, 2007, 139.

number of recurring 'themes' that have emerged out of discussions of biennials and curatorial practice.⁵ By focusing on these themes, greater understanding of the interplay and unity of opposing forces and ideas that often characterise biennials can be reached.⁶ This methodology also serves to address the biennial's opportunity to provide, as curator and critic Ivo Mesquita has proposed, unresolved 'in-between spaces for creative inventiveness and new dialogue': an opportunity suggested by the concomitant opportunities of their 'unresolved contradictions'.⁷ It may also contribute to a more meaningful formal analysis of biennials. As a case study for this analysis, I will concentrate on the 16th Biennale of Sydney, 'Revolutions – Forms that Turn' (2008) curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Firstly, however, some historical context.

Modernism, Contradiction and the Biennial

Although the concerns and aims of biennials differ depending on context, the contradictory nature of biennials can in part be traced back to the birth of the phenomenon with the establishment of the Venice Biennale in 1895. As an expression of the spirit of modernism, the Biennale was founded at a time when the idea of progress related to the collective modernisation of nations.⁸ It was a deliberate attempt to modernise artistic and cultural production within the city of Venice itself, to 'de-provincialise' it by providing expanded cultural horizons while embracing an international art market.⁹ An exhibition-event (to adopt curator Paul O'Neill's term),¹⁰ but also an institution, the inaugural Biennale sought to serve both local and international cultural, political and economic interests. At the same time, it sought to bring unseen art to the region, stimulating local production and visibility while operating in and expanding the context and *lingua franca* of the global art market. Through its Biennale, Venice was to be continually made modern.¹¹

It is, I propose, through this biennial-as-mechanism-of-modernity that host cities continue to demonstrate their dedication to the ongoing creation of a culture industry, as seen in the proliferation of biennials of a wide range of cities since the 1990s. As was the intention with Venice, biennials' frequent re-expression of their host city as a

⁵ They are also loosely related to the contradictions noted by Michael Brenson in his essay 'The Curator's Moment' of 1997 in which he heralded the 'era' of the biennial and its curator. Brenson's contradictions included: working nationally as well as internationally or transnationally, advancing local and global culture, and belief in the autonomous value of art while placing it in a socio-political context. Brenson, 1998, pp. 17-19.

⁶ To advance analysis of the Biennale in terms of form, I have focused on the form of the Biennale's exhibition while also drawing on the discursive paradigm that overlapped and augmented it. The Biennale's key lectures, symposium presentations and discussions, artists' talks and other fora provided primary data for my research. Also, I have considered the art historical approach to formal analysis of an artwork to be applicable to a biennial exhibition, while recognising that all of the facets of any large-scale biennial could never be fully experienced or analysed. Drawing on Sylvan Barnet's discussion of the nature and practice of formal analysis, I privilege the experience of the 'viewer' while considering what I deem to be the most pertinent and substantiated 'words' of the curator and artists as well as a broad art historical and theoretical context. Barnet, 2008, pp. 23, 31, 113, 115.

⁷ Mesquita, 2003, pp. 66-67.

⁸ Lawrence Alloway relates the Venice Biennale to 'the great exhibition' such as London's Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations (1851) and Paris's Exposition Universelle (1855). Alloway, 1968, p. 32.

⁹ Giandomenico, 2007, pp. 43-45.

¹⁰ O'Neill, 2007, p. 17.

¹¹ Alloway, 1968, p. 31.

centre for contemporary art repeatedly transforms history into signs of the present and brings them into the orbit of an international art market.¹² As stated by Bruce Ferguson et al., biennials have a (not unproblematic) common history: a modernist doctrine that positions art as a form of international exchange represented by its assumed universal language.¹³ A similar claim has been made by biennial curator Okwui Enwezor, who states that cities which are continually made 'genuine destinations' through the cultural currency of their biennials are able to better master the language of artistic modernity and access its resources, while presuming to add their own voice and unique capabilities.¹⁴ Biennial curator Carlos Basualdo also notes the way contemporary art has acquired 'symbolic capital', paradoxically linked to its presumed independence from market logic. Biennials trade such capital to provide local contexts with a sense of prestige and ratify their commitment to the processes of economic and cultural integration.¹⁵

However, while biennials may be read as a continual expression of modernity, they also serve to critique it. Biennials have become a platform for critical and self-reflexive curators, a direction encouraged in the 1970s with the rise of the curator as *auteur* or autonomous 'author' of exhibitions.¹⁶ They have also become increasingly concerned with the continual negotiation of critical and cultural boundaries.¹⁷ Examples include the controversial biennials Documenta X, Documenta 11 (1997 and 2002) and the 50th Venice Biennale (2003).¹⁸ According to one *Artforum* roundtable discussion of 2003, these biennials were integral in establishing a mode of discourse that seeks to critique a consumerist pursuit of modernity and its instantiation of

¹² Notable recent statements made by biennial institutions include that of the Bienal Caerá América which emphasises the 'vivid and important function' the Bienal plays in the economic development of Fortaleza (Ceará, Brazil) and explicitly links the biennial concept to the ambition of 'distanced countries.' (Bienal Caerá América, 2002, <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/ceara-america/2002/txt/e-concept.htm>; accessed October 3, 2008.) Similarly, the Dak'Art Biennial institution stresses the role of the Biennial, as an indicator of culture, in progressing African societies 'towards a better life.' (Dak'Art Biennale, 2008, http://www.biennaledakar.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=95&lang=en; accessed October 3, 2008.) In the case of Gwangju, the Biennale is presented as propelled by Asia's modernisation and an aid in the redefinition of Asia's economic and political role at a global level. (Gwangju Biennale, 2008, http://www.gwangju-biennale.org/2008gb/eng/about/Exhibition_Structure.html; accessed October 3, 2008). The Beijing Biennale states its desire to expand the 'celebrity' of Beijing as host city, 'advance the content of culture', and 'accelerate' economic development through tourism. (Beijing Biennale, 2008, <http://www.bjbiennale.com.cn/en/jianjie.asp?ClassID=1>; accessed September 30, 2008.)

¹³ Ferguson et al., 2005, p. 51.

¹⁴ Enwezor, 2004, p. 24. Here I use the term 'biennial curator' to identify a curator who has been notably associated with their curation of biennials, which does not preclude their curation of other forms of exhibition in other contexts. I am personally ambivalent toward the common term 'international curator' which, while in common usage and an important indicator of the rise of the curator coincident with the biennial phenomenon, is somewhat nebulous given that many curators who may not curate biennials are engaged with international concerns and exhibitions. In addition, the concept of any one curator being wholly 'international' is questionable.

¹⁵ Basualdo, 2003-4, pp. 52, 56.

¹⁶ Heinich and Pollak, 1996, pp. 231-50.

¹⁷ Notably, such curatorial negotiation was discussed at length during one of the high-profile conferences to mark the increased urgency of contemporary curating co-incident with the proliferation of biennials in the 1990s: the Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future Symposium (Banff, Canada). (White, 1996.)

¹⁸ Although Documenta is a quinquennial, it is considered highly influential within the field of biennials. (Filipović, 2005, p. 65).

‘globalisation’.¹⁹ As such, Documenta X and Documenta 11, and the 1993 Whitney Biennial’s notable attempt to present ‘political’ art, have also influenced discourse around the so-called ‘political’ biennial.²⁰

Further, by operating in the realm of cultural tourism and resisting academic description, biennials have the potential to become what Basualdo has identified as a ‘surreptitious short circuit’ of the traditional art system. Paradoxically, the presumed instrumentality and spectacular nature of biennials may present curators with a range of practical and theoretical possibilities to explore in response to a particular biennial.²¹ Such a claim certainly resonates with Thomas Crow’s book *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, in which Crow points to a symbiotic relationship between ‘art’ and ‘common culture’, predicated on the modernist avant-garde’s ‘borrowing from below’ to develop heterogeneous cultural practice to transgress traditional limits and boundaries.²²

The Dialectics of Biennials

It is my proposal, then, that a number of contradictions or, more precisely, dialectics can be said to characterise biennials. I define dialectic in line with philosopher Albrecht Wellmer’s proposed dialectic of modernism and postmodernism. Wellmer’s dialectic recognises postmodern critique fundamental to modernity as well as the re-expression of modernity in postmodernity. Following his example, I do not use the term ‘dialectic’ to unreservedly invoke its traditional historical and philosophical associations.²³ While I do at least accept a notion of dialectic as a catalyst of knowledge (after Hegel) and movement, change and, even, radicality (after Marx), I am more interested in the application of ‘dialectic’ in what Wellmer describes as a more ‘postmodern sense’.²⁴ Contradiction and dialectic is, in this sense, unconcerned with resolution and rejects contradiction as the basis of a dialectical totality or system. It is principally concerned with the interaction of opposing concepts and the potentiality for new modes of thought through the consideration of a unity of opposites.

These dialectics can be summarised in a framework with which to describe and discuss biennials by instance and in general. Biennials continue to operate as mechanisms of modernity while they offer postmodern critique. As such, they are both a market-driving and market-driven phenomenon and a form of cultural tourism and spectacle, and a potential vehicle to question dominant paradigms (evinced a modernity–postmodernity dialectic). In addition, they are exhibition-events expected to advance both local and global concerns (a local–global dialectic), and a potential

¹⁹ Griffin, Meyer, Bonami, David, Enwezor, Obrist, Rosler, Shonibare, 2003, pp. 152-63, 206, 212.

²⁰ For texts that outline and reinforce the notable criticality or politicality of Documenta X see: David, 1997, pp. 6-13; Steinbrügge, 2005, pp. 353-364; and Storr, 1997, pp. 77-80, 129, 131, 142. For Documenta 11 see: Enwezor, 2002, unpaginated; Becker, 2002, pp. 8-27; Downey, 2003, pp. 85-92; Heartney, 2002, pp. 87-95; Lenk, 2005, pp. 375-387; Levin, 2002, <http://villagevoice.com/2002-07-02/art/the-cnn-documenta/>, accessed August 7, 2008; Martin, 2003, pp. 7-19; Murray, 2003, pp. 40-47; and Stengel and Scharf, 2005, pp. 113-4. For the 1993 Whitney Biennial see: Kelly, 2000, pp. 221-263; Wright, 2005, pp. 187-203; and Foster et al., 1993, pp. 3-27.

²¹ Basualdo, 2003-4, pp. 58-60.

²² Crow, 1996, p. 8.

²³ Wellmer, 1991, p. 37.

²⁴ Wellmer, 1991, p. 37.

site for discourse on the dynamics of globalisation on which they depend (an instantiation–exposition dialectic.) Finally, they create and trade in the symbolic value of art based on its assumed autonomy while they can be political (an art–politics dialectic).²⁵

The 16th Biennale of Sydney, ‘Revolutions – Forms That Turn’ was presented between 18 June and 7 September 2008. Traditional gallery spaces were provided by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and Artspace, while the former prison and shipyard Cockatoo Island, and Pier 2/3 in the historic waterfront precinct of Walsh Bay, provided key alternative venues.²⁶ The Biennale, which was concerned with contradiction, can be explored further according to the themes of my proposed framework.

A Modernity-Postmodernity Dialectic: Embodying Modernity and its Critique

The 16th Biennale of Sydney was critical of the biennial phenomenon. This was signalled at a high level by the word-play contained in the Biennale’s title or theme, with its contradictory parts ‘Revolutions’ and ‘Forms that Turn’.²⁷ With the first word ‘revolution’ Christov-Bakargiev anticipated or created a visitor’s expectation of a ‘political’ exhibition. This expectation could then be overturned when a visitor arrived at a venue to discover art works concerned with notions of physical and perceptual movement, and some, such as Michael Snow’s revolving sculpture *De La* (1969-72) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, that literally turned.

In addition, Christov-Bakargiev’s word-play created contradiction and confusion, or a ‘constant reversal of associations’ at the level of language.²⁸ This allowed ‘revolution’ to be considered, and perhaps rediscovered, in terms of ‘forms that turn’. As cued by the curator’s text and presented works, the meaning of ‘revolution’ could be questioned. In particular, the idea of a sudden, abrupt, even violent change could be juxtaposed with the word’s original meaning to turn (*volvere*) and repeat that turn over and over again (*re-volvere*).²⁹ Revolution, which became an uncertain concept, could be considered more broadly in terms of what might be more radical change or a

²⁵ It is possible that applying the framework to a particular biennial will result in combining or even expanding dialectical themes as they overlap and subsidiary or additional dialectics become relevant. In this case of ‘The 16th Biennale of Sydney, ‘Revolutions – Forms That Turn’ an instantiation–exposition and a local–global dialectic are considered together. Further, in my dissertation on which this essay is based, an art–politics dialectic is also considered alongside a freedom–necessity dialectic to explore negotiation of the politics of the ‘global’ representation of artists and cultures. Further, a representation–iconographies of content dialectic was explored in relation to negotiating art and politics. This explored issues surrounding ‘political’ biennials such as the Whitney Biennial (1993) and Documenta 11 (2002) and the conflict and interplay between representing a politics of the signifier contained and expressed in an art work’s form and materials and a politics of the signified or political message at the level of the exhibition-event.

²⁶ In addition, a programme comprising a symposium, public forums, artist’s talks, panel discussions, lectures, a film series, performances, and an online venue was offered. The Sydney Opera House and the Royal Botanic Gardens were also alternative ‘venues’.

²⁷ Christov-Bakargiev, 2008a, p. 33. Christov-Bakargiev, 2008b:

<http://www.bos2008.com/page/theme.html>, accessed April 15, 2009. Christov-Bakargiev, 2008d.

²⁸ Christov-Bakargiev and Storer, 2008, p. 608.

²⁹ Christov-Bakargiev, 2008a, p.30. Also see Begg, 2008, p. 19.

potentially surreptitious and cyclical process of individual and collective consideration and reconsideration.³⁰

Not allowing the concept of ‘revolution’ to settle, particularly quiet, even meditative works such as Simryn Gill’s fifty small spheres, *Mine* (2008), and Qiu Anxiong’s almost-static video of a tree through the seasons, *Jiang Nan Poem* (2005) provided an

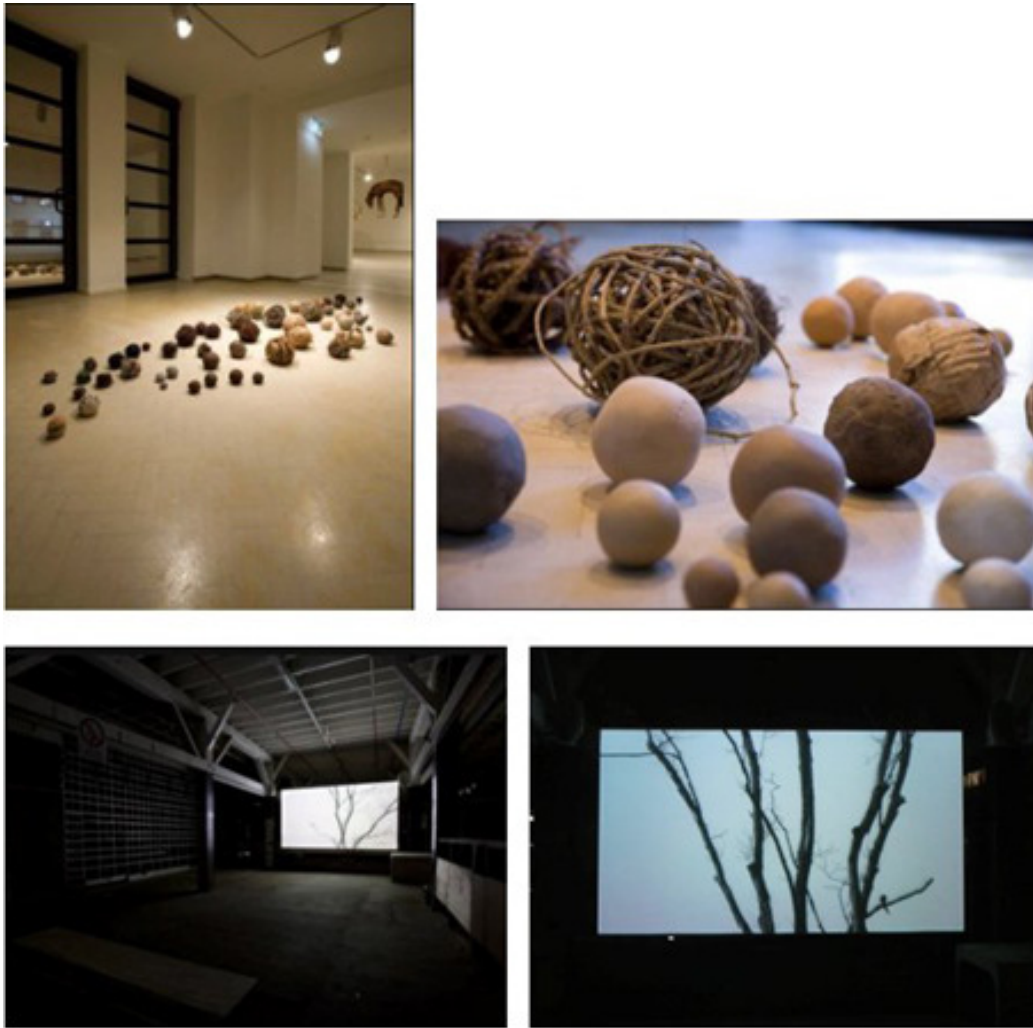


Fig 1. Simryn Gill, *Mine*, 2008. Found natural and man-made materials and objects, installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. (Photographs by Jenni Carter.) Qui Anxiong, *Jiang Nan Poem*, 2005. Video, 12:45 mins, installation at Cockatoo Island, Sydney, courtesy the artist and Boers-Li Gallery, Beijing. (Photograph by Jenni Carter (bottom left) and the author (bottom right).)

obvious counterpoint to what might be considered more ‘radical’ works (Fig. 1). Also, as perhaps indicated by inclusion of Luigi Russolo’s sound machines, *Intonarumori*, from 1913 to 1921, ‘revolution’ was explored through sound and auditory experience. Soundtracks and effects, or sound as its own phenomenological entity circled within venues, particularly at the Art Gallery of New South Wales where Atsuko Tanaka’s chain of floor-level bells, *Work [Bell]* (1955, remade 2000) began in one part of the

³⁰ See Christov-Bakargiev’s discussion of ‘revolution’: Christov-Bakargiev, 2008a, pp. 30, 31, 33.

exhibition, traversed the entirety of an adjoining room and ended in yet another part of the exhibition. Notably positioned at Pier 2/3 along with *Intonarumori*, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's 100-channel 'sound play', *Murder of Crows* (2008) encircled and enveloped the viewer with the artists' stories and music of dreams and nightmares. It epitomised the Biennale's dedication to what sound producer and historian of auditory culture Virginia Madsen described as sound's ability to usurp, dynamise and transform space — its sonic force and revolutionary potential.³¹ (Fig 2).



Fig 2. Installation view, Pier 2/3, Walsh Bay, Sydney. Luigi Russolo, *Intonarumori*. 1913 and 1920, reconstructed 2002 and 2006, courtesy Fondazione Gabriele Emilia Bianchi onlus, Mirano (Venice) and Collection Pietro Verardo, Venice. (Photograph by Ben Symons.) Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *Murder of Crows*, sound and mixed media installation, courtesy of the artists, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin.

³¹ Madsen, 2008. Also see Christov-Bakargiev's explanation of the importance of sound to the exhibition in Christov-Bakargiev, 2008a, p. 32.

Further, while the 16th Biennale of Sydney ratified Sydney as a progressive international hub or center of advanced culture, it also exposed and embodied the exhibition-event's ability to both embody and critique modernity through artists' works. Christov-Bakargiev unexpectedly brought many key works of the historical avant-garde of the early and mid twentieth century together with contemporary works.³² As a result, the Biennale explored and celebrated the revolutionary creative impulse essential to key historic movements such as Italian Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Kinetic Art, Fluxus, the Situationist International and Arte Povera, which have all presented and offered new models of critical and counter-cultural practice. At the same time, it extended that trajectory to contemporary works similarly concerned with spatial, temporal, conceptual and cultural intervention.

Christov-Bakargiev's creation of a modern-postmodern context was commensurate with Albrecht Wellmer's description of a dialectic of modernism and postmodernism. Such a dialectic recognises the modernist genesis of postmodernism and the continuance of modernism in postmodernism. It recognises that aspects of the spirit of modernity persist or are re-expressed in postmodernity.³³ With the Biennale, this involved continuing the radical modern artist's inherent belief in individualism and the shifting of perception as a catalyst to change while reaching beyond the heroic spirit of modernism to embrace postmodern scepticism, and a search for greater complexity, contradiction and the impossibility of ultimate reconciliations.³⁴

The Constellation

The 'constellation' is a form of exhibition that allowed Christov-Bakargiev to embody her theme, enabling an interplay between what could be considered opposed concepts.³⁵ Such a form was advanced in 1994 during the *Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future* symposium in Banff, Canada. As it was then described by curator Sharon Brooks, the 'constellation' provides a way to produce something new through the assemblage of contrary fragments: an idea central to modern artists' critique of modernity. It creates what Brooks describes as an 'ensemble' of singular works that react 'in a kind of temporality that is generative, even explosive'. It is a form that creates an open and fluid relationship between works and invites the formative participation of viewers to note and negotiate the 'interrogatory gaps' between works.³⁶

³² In addition to works that will be discussed in relation to each dialectic, key historic works included: Tina Modotti's photograph *Woman with Flag* (1928); John Cage's *4'33"* (1952, recording of re-performance 2004); Saburo Murakami's photographs *Passing Through* (1955); Yves Klein's photographs of his *Leap into the Void* (1960, reprinted 2008); Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York (fragment)* (1960); Piero Manzoni's photograph *Socle du Monde* [Base of the World] (1961); Carolee Schneemann's film *Meat Joy* (1964); Gianni Colombo's kinetic sculpture *Elastic Space* (1967); Mario Merz's *Sit-in* (1968); and Dan Graham's film *Helix/Spiral* (1973).

³³ Wellmer, 1991, pp. vii-ix, 36-57, 94.

³⁴ This relates to Christov-Bakargiev's previous statement of her interest in modernism-postmodernism as it was explored in her exhibition 'I Moderni/The Moderns' (2003, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy). (Christov-Bakargiev, 2003, p. 21.) It also relates to Wellmer's discussion of the way in which modernity is continued in postmodernity. (Wellmer, 1991, pp. vii-ix.)

³⁵ Here I am referring to the 'constellation' as a form of exhibition. I am not using the word in its broadest and more popular sense in which it describes any kind of loose collection of people or things (for example, the fora of the Biennale were called 'constellations').

³⁶ Brooks, 1996, pp. 99, 104.

Christov-Bakargiev created a constellation of historical and contemporary works.³⁷ In doing so, she rejected the tendency for biennials to focus on the latest art and artists. In addition, she was able to disrupt a linear model of history and a consumerist desire to differentiate 'new' from 'old' to claim all of the work as contemporary.³⁸ Also, Christov-Bakargiev went further to create a 'constellation of constellations', or a constellar exhibition comprised of smaller constellations that explore the same contradictory associations to pose questions about the radical potential of individuality and contemporary art.³⁹ Key constellations loosely provided the conceptual basis or character of the exhibition at each venue and formed ideas that also circled between venues.

As a possible beginning to the exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (the venue from where the greater exhibition could be seen to loosely radiate), Christov-Bakargiev presented her 'bicycle constellation' and the artistically privileged bicycle wheel as a provocative form for new modes of thought.⁴⁰ Centered on Duchamp's iconic *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, the constellation also presented the short videos of Klara Lidén, *Bodies of Society*, 2006, and Bari Kumar, *Army of Forgotten Souls*, 2005 (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Bari Kumar, *Army of Forgotten Souls*, 2005. Video, 3 mins, still image courtesy of the artist and Bose Pacia Gallery, New York. Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913. Painted wooden stool and bicycle wheel, 126.5 x wheel-diameter 64.8 cm. © Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP. Licensed by VISCOPY, 2009. Klara Lidén, *Bodies of Society*, 2006. Video, 4:50 mins, courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York.

In *Bodies of Society* Lidén is seen in a small apartment in which she repeatedly strikes a bicycle with a metal rod. Initially she seems to be testing what the bicycle is and how it sounds, as well as the reality of her actions. Ultimately, she calmly (perhaps even nonchalantly) beats the bicycle almost to pieces. In this work Lidén explores the concern that underlies her practice: what it means (if anything) to take one's own counter-normative action in one's own space.⁴¹ Along similar but different lines, Kumar presents the straining back of a rickshaw rider phasing into an image of the automated three wheeler that brought an end to the era of the rickshaw wallah, in exploration of an individual's acceptance and denial of inevitable urbanisation.

³⁷ Christov-Bakargiev, 2008c: <http://artipedia.org/artsnews/exhibitions/2008/06/17/16th-biennale-of-sydney-revolutions-forms-that-turn-2/>; accessed April 21, 2009.

³⁸ Clement, 2008a: <http://www.artlink.com.au/articles.cfm?id=3083>; accessed April 21, 2009. Christov-Bakargiev, 2008a, p. 33. King 2008: <http://speechinterviews.blogspot.com/2008/04/carolyn-christov-bakargiev-with-natalie.html>; accessed April 21, 2009.

³⁹ Christov-Bakargiev, 2008d.

⁴⁰ Christov-Bakargiev, 2008d.

⁴¹ Thorne, 2008, p. 206.

Together these ‘bicycle’ works opened a space for questions, such as: What constitutes anarchic action today? What does it mean for an individual to ignore codes of behaviour? What is memory and imagination in the face of modernisation? And can art be radical, and, if so, to what effect? Such questions underpinned the Biennale without offering the prospect of finality or closure, as particularly evidenced in the way discussion of such questions circled during the forum, ‘Subversive Forms’, dedicated to discussing the subversive potential of works of art at Artspace on the 19th of June.

What could loosely be identified as Christov-Bakargiev’s ‘spiral’ constellation was also presented in the entrance vestibule and entrance court of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This constellation mobilised turning or spiralling as a form of physical as well as perceptual movement. It began with Michael Rakowitz’s tower and socially-motivated sculpture, *White man got no dreaming* (2008) — a replica of Tatlin’s unbuilt spiralling *Monument to the Third International* (1919) built in collaboration with the Redfern community out of materials from condemned housing owned by the Aboriginal Housing Company — and Gordon Matta-Clark’s film *Office Baroque* (1977/2005) (Fig. 4). The spiralling forms of both embodied and released an exploration of hopes for physical and social emancipation, without assuming their fulfilment.



Fig. 4. Installation view, Art Gallery of New South Wales. Michael Rakowitz, *White man got no dreaming*, 2008. Mixed media, 465 x 336 cm diameter. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Documentation of Office Baroque*, 1977. Colour photograph, courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York. © Gordon Matta Clark, 1977/ARS. Licensed by VISCOPY, 2009.

The ‘spiral’ constellation then continued in the lobby with Bruce Nauman’s neon spiral, and its unresolvable question-claim ‘The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths’, hung as a backdrop to Ross Gibson’s *Conversations II*, 2008. Within a semi-enclosed ‘conversation room’ Gibson and participants explored conversation as a form in which ideas cycle between people and individual and collective perception and experience is potentially affected and changed. This was echoed in, but ironically reversed by, Solakov’s *A Life (Black & White)*. In this work, two hired painters, one working with black paint and the other with white, continually painted the inside walls of the gallery’s entrance court, each painting over the other’s work in a seemingly endless loop (Fig. 5).

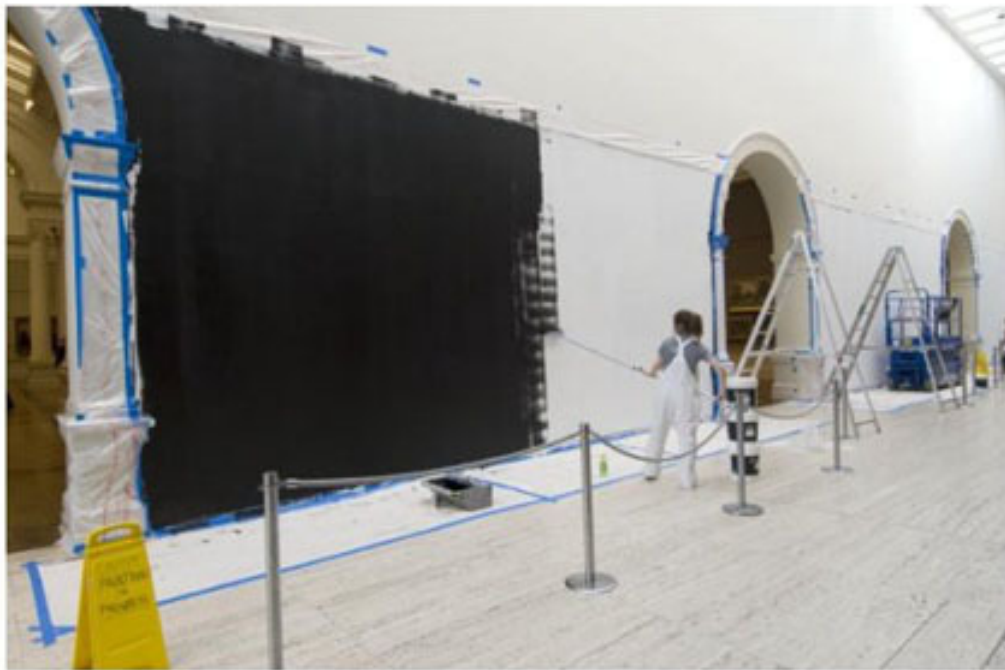
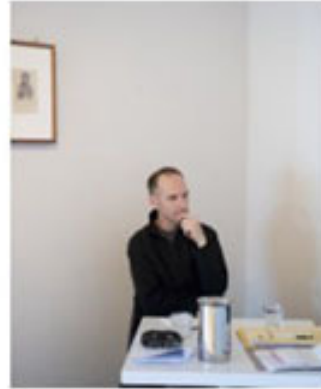


Fig. 5. Bruce Nauman, *The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths* (Window or wall sign), 1967. Fluorescent tubes, 149.9 x 139.7 x 5.1 cm. (© Bruce Nauman/ARS. Licensed by VISCOPY, 2009.) Ross Gibson, *Conversations II*, 2008. Durational work involving the artist in conversation with a member of the public. (Photograph by Jenni Carter.) Nedkov Solakov, *A Life (Black & White)*, 2008. Durational work, two painters, black and white paint. (Photograph by Jenni Carter.)



Fig. 6. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Maurizio Cattelan, *Novocento*, 1997. Taxidermied horse, metal frame, slings, rope, 200 x 269.9 x 69.9 cm. (Photograph by Ben Symons.) Installation view of *Novocento* with Aleksandr Rodchenko's *Hanging Spatial Construction No. 11 Square in Square*, 1920-21 and *Hanging Spatial Construction No. 9 Circle in Circle*, 1920-21, courtesy Fairfaxphotos.com. (Photograph by Robert Pearce.)

Christov-Bakargiev's exploration of modernism–postmodernism also included an identifiable play between utopianism and scepticism. This was particularly evident in what could be called the 'suspension' constellation of works at the Museum of Contemporary Art that explored the potentiality of movement through a number of 'mobiles'. Here, Maurizio Cattelan's suspended taxidermic horse, *Novocento* (1997), which references Bernardo Bertolucci's 1976 film *1900* (pronounced *Novecento* in Italian), alluded to the weight of twentieth-century revolutionary ambitions. It also provided a counterpoint to Alexandr Rodchenko's hanging spatial constructions that were dedicated to the utopian goal of constructing new art forms for the construction of a post-revolutionary Russia (Fig. 6).⁴²

Play between utopianism and scepticism was also pertinent to a constellation presented at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in which Christov-Bakargiev explored the idea of an art work 'working' outside of itself.⁴³ In that constellation, Joseph Beuys' first blackboard outlining his *Office for Direct Democracy* (1971) resonated with but was also questioned by Raquel Ormella's revolving whiteboards in her installation *feral animal office* (Fig. 7).⁴⁴ With his blackboard, Beuys annotated and shared his ideas on achieving 'more creativity for every person' as a form of 'social sculpture' or catalyst of radical social change.⁴⁵ With Ormella's whiteboards the romanticised notion of the political activist is explored. Her hand-drawn snapshots of the interior of the Hobart campaign office of the Wilderness Society, for which she was both artist and activist, position the artist as activist. But these drawings are at times overlaid and obscured by her sketches of wilderness photography and landscape painting used as campaign imagery, the product of the artist not quite put to radical use.⁴⁶

Negotiating Globalisation and the Paradox of Place: Towards the Biennial as its own 'Locality'

Biennials are global events that take place in and are identified with a particular location. As such, they attempt to be locally meaningful as well as internationally relevant and significant, or what Claire Doherty refers to as 'a situation like no other.'⁴⁷ They appropriate the unique characteristics, meanings and myths of a city and borrow from an international art world to enhance their own appeal and favourably position their affiliate city within a global network of centers. However, they are also subject to what I have identified as a local–global dialectic as biennial curators are faced with what curator and critic Thomas Wulfflen considers the paradox of providing globality with respect to locality.

⁴² Several of Rodchenko's photographs, such as *Suchow-Radio-Tower with a Guard* (1929), intended to encourage the new vision befitting an active citizen's desire to transform habits of seeing were also presented alongside Rodchenko's hanging constructions. Photograms by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy also flanked *Novecento*. Moholy-Nagy's utopian impulse was similar to Rodchenko's, although he was particularly interested in directly representing light as the source of revolutionary photography and ways of seeing. Margolin, 1997, pp. 14–15, 133. Marien, 2002, p. 252.

⁴³ Christov-Bakargiev, 2008d.

⁴⁴ See the online interview with Natalie King for Christov-Bakargiev's discussion of this intent. King 2008: <http://speechinterviews.blogspot.com/2008/04/carolyn-christov-bakargiev-with-natalie.html>; accessed April 21, 2009.

⁴⁵ Mesch and Michely, 2007, p. 189.

⁴⁶ Ormella, 2005: <http://www.raquelormella.com/archive.htm>; accessed April 21, 2009.

⁴⁷ Doherty, 2007, p. 107.



Fig. 7. Installation view, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Joseph Beuys, *Blackboard from the Office for Direct Democracy*, 1971. Chalk on blackboard, 134 x 185 cm, collection Adolf-Luther-Foundation, Krefeld, Germany. Raquel Ormella, *feral animal office*, 2008. Six whiteboards, thermal paper, each 200 x 240 x 70 cm, courtesy of the artist and Mori Gallery, Sydney. (Photographs by Ben Symons.)

Curators, as Basualdo also points out, do interrogate local histories and contexts, but frequently in relation to a presumed international horizon.⁴⁸

The Biennale ‘of Sydney’ has long endured a problematic (yet fruitful) relationship with its city. Sydney-based academic Jacqueline Millner, in her article on ‘Revolutions – Forms That Turn’, states that the artistic community in particular have criticised the Biennale’s inability to engage with the specificity of its location, and its tendency to instead treat the city as nothing more than ‘a host city with a series of well appointed venues’ while sourcing culture from elsewhere.⁴⁹ Similarly, Artspace’s Blair French describes the Biennale’s inability to take account of its local ‘artworld’ context.⁵⁰ Such a problematic relationship could be seen as unavoidable if we recognise a biennial’s contradictory goal of providing globality with respect to locality. Nevertheless, the Biennale is seen to benefit Sydney in a number of ways, such as its ability to create rare opportunities for intense focus on contemporary art through exhibitions, public events and forums and catalyse local discourse. It has also fundamentally engaged a process of internationalising Australian art, bringing international art into a local ambit and placing Australian art in an international context.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Basualdo, 2003-4, p. 58.

⁴⁹ Millner, 2008, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁰ French, 2008, p. 5.

⁵¹ Paroissien, 2003, pp. 66-68.

'Revolutions – Forms That Turn' did not directly address or overturn the problematic relationship the Biennale holds with its location. If the Biennale did engage with 'Sydney', it was primarily through the use of Cockatoo Island as a venue, relating the exhibition-event to its harbour and convict history (Fig. 8). Accessible by ferry, this largest of Sydney Harbour's islands is only a short distance from the city and provides a view back to it. It also clearly displays traces of its history as a convict prison and major military shipyard. Parts of its industrial areas seem to have been left almost as they were: cranes, large machines and remnants of machinery remain throughout the island. Art works were widely spread throughout the lower and upper island making use of what were convict barracks, industrial and drafting workshops, domestic houses, and bomb shelters. Each work was presented in its own particular space and visitors were required to seek or discover works without direction.⁵²

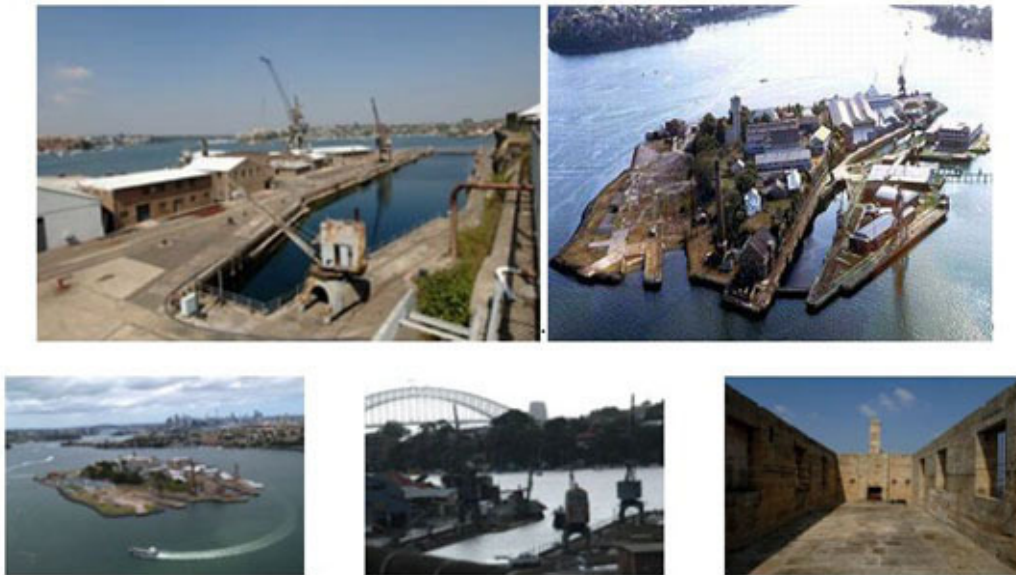


Fig. 8. Cockatoo Island, Sydney Harbour. Courtesy of the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust.

However, Christov-Bakargiev's vision for Cockatoo Island involved more than referencing or rediscovering local landmarks and their history. It was instead in line with what Doherty optimistically outlines as the emergence of biennial curating concerned with broader, more abstract and spatial conceptions of place, such as that proposed by Miwon Kwon in her book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*.⁵³ In her interview with Natalie King, Christov-Bakargiev described Cockatoo Island as a paradoxical space.⁵⁴ The island, which was once the site of Australia's largest prison, allows visitors an opportunity to quietly look back

⁵² Although a small map was provided to indicate the position of works throughout the island within the Biennale programme booklet.

⁵³ Doherty, 2007, pp. 100-8. Kwon, 2002.

⁵⁴ King 2008: <http://speechinterviews.blogspot.com/2008/04/carolyn-christov-bakargiev-with-natalie.html>; accessed April 21, 2009.

on the city from a distance. As a representative microcosm of Australian history, the island also activated consideration of a paradoxical Australian society.⁵⁵ From Christov-Bakargiev's perspective, a duality has resulted from the fact that the country was effectively Britain's largest prison while also a founding colony, allowing it to create its own freedoms despite its context of governance.⁵⁶ The island became a site where the physical experience of being isolated yet free of the city allowed and heightened Christov-Bakargiev's exploration of the nature and dynamics of socio-cultural entrapment and emancipation.

Ferguson et al., in their essay 'Mapping International Exhibitions' relate that many international exhibitions use the 'grotto', or abandoned industrial sites, as urban counterparts to interrupt and mediate everyday perception of 'the city'. These sites provide a dual experience of space, the overlap of 'place and trace', as was particularly evident on Cockatoo Island. Such spaces are never fully integrated with the familiar. They are 'off-circuit', an 'elsewhere', able to make infinitely more subtle and new exchanges between cultural contexts and artworks.⁵⁷

Christov-Bakargiev's activation of Cockatoo island as such an 'elsewhere' allowed a type of psychogeographic experience through which the nature of the city and its culture (and cities generally) could be realised and potentially re-imagined from a distance. This could occur as an individual engaged in a kind of *dérive* (drift) through spaces Christov-Bakargiev described as 'here, there and nowhere' and in which the nature and problems of the city and country's culture were inferred (and relevant in an international context).⁵⁸ As self-styled leader of the Situationist International Guy Debord described it, the *dérive* was an opportunity to drop all usual motives for movement and action to be drawn by what is found. Such 'playful-constructive' behaviour, to use Debord's words, could then create a space of possibility for thought and activity not formerly determined by one's experience of an urban landscape.⁵⁹



Fig. 9. Installation view, Cockatoo Island, Sydney. Anna Maria Maiolini, *In-Out (Antropophagy)*, 1973. Colour super 8 film, transferred to video in 2000, courtesy of the artist. (Left photograph by the author, right photograph by Jenni Carter.)

⁵⁵ The island's history and presence as a microcosm of Australian history is noted on the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust web site: <http://www.cockatooisland.gov.au/about/history/>; accessed April 17, 2009.

⁵⁶ Clement, 2008b: <http://www.artguide.com.au/features/turn-turn-turn-the-past-talks-to-the-present/>; accessed April 21, 2009.

⁵⁷ Ferguson et al., 2005, p. 54.

⁵⁸ Christov-Bakargiev, 2008a, p. 33.

⁵⁹ Debord, 1981, p. 62.

The installation of Anna Maria Maiolino's video-based film *In-Out (Antropophagy)*, 1973, embodied an idea of 'place and trace'. Maiolino's work, concerned with the consumption of European culture in Brazil in the late 1920s, was installed in a round concrete bunker with cage-like doors common on the island (Fig. 9). Exploring themes of gagging or censorship and the unheard and dislocated speech that can occur between two people, the work is a poignant symbol of cultural dislocation and frustrated personal expression in general, raising the spectre of a repressive modern society and compelling escape from it.

Works such as Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* (2002) installed in former prison barracks, also took on heightened meaning in this context (Fig. 10). Deller's work re-enacts the miners' strike that took place in Thatcherite Britain in 1984 and led to a violent clash with police. It is intercut with historic documentary footage and present-day interviews, including a vox-pop from Deller in which he says that, in modern society, a 'protester' is a 'troublemaker' even before deciding to protest. Involving the same miners who were part of the original strike, the work investigates when a society or community chooses to riot and what that means, as well as society's ongoing inability to 'protest'.



Fig. 10. Jeremy Deller, stills from *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2002, Director Mike Figgis. Video, 60 mins, courtesy Artangel, London.

Other works created specifically for the Biennale on Cockatoo Island poignantly played between entrapment and emancipation such as TV Moore's *Escape Carnival*, Susan Philipsz's *Internationale*, Shaun Gladwell's *Ghost Rider*, and Mike Parr's *MIRROR/ARSE* (2008).



Fig. 11. Installation view, Cockatoo Island, Sydney. TV Moore, *Escape Carnival*, 2008. Two-channel video and sound installation. (Photographs by the author.)

Escape Carnival, a video and sound installation in the island's 300 metre long Dogleg Tunnel (linking one side of the island to the other) presented a video of a man endlessly running in that tunnel. With its all-enveloping soundtrack of the running man's laboured breathing and exultant high pop-psychedelic music, the work seemed to promise psychological release from a 'no place' evocative of the dislocation and alienation of modern life (Fig. 11). Philipsz's sound installation, her pure solo voice singing the *Internationale*, resonated in a space that would once have been filled with the sound of heavy machinery and hundreds of men at work. A song that should be a rallying cry for collective action became a kind of auditory memorial, while also alive with sonic freedom, questioning the possible return of such sentiment to the present.⁶⁰

In Gladwell's sound and video installation the art of *dérive* was given over to the mountain bicycle as he was seen in dream-like slow motion riding city streets at night, on his back wheel and almost allowing the bike 'to ride itself' (Fig. 12).⁶¹ Mike Parr's installation of videos of fourteen of his most daring and demanding performance

⁶⁰ For a discussion of Philipsz's essential ability to achieve such a 'temporal paradox' through her songs see Griffin, 2008, p. 205.

⁶¹ Gladwell, 2008.



Fig. 12. Installation view, Cockatoo Island, Sydney. Shaun Gladwell, *Ghost Rider*, 2008. Digital video and mixed media sculptural installation. (Photograph by Greg Weight.)

works fully utilised the derelict former sailors' quarters to confront viewers with revolting situations (Fig. 13). Visions of the artist involved in self-mutilation and the sound of his grunts of pain, the stench of buckets of urine, and rooms and hallways often strewn with the carcasses of dead sea-birds were perhaps both horrifying and liberating as a viewer's emotional, physical and psychological limits were tested.

As an 'elsewhere' grounded in the Sydney-Australian context, Cockatoo island could be seen to relate to biennial curator Hou Hanru's concept of the biennial as a 'new locality'. For Hanru, a biennial's 'locality' owes itself to its contradictory presence as both local and global and is an opportunity to develop new concepts of 'place'. It can be the dynamic nexus of the local and global.⁶² As noted by Hanru, this 'locality' reflects socio-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's concept and description of a 'neighbourhood', which Appadurai describes as being both context-specific and context-generative beyond nationally-bound notions of place and able to mobilise a globally defined field of criticality and possibility.⁶³ It is a site where the experience of a locale and its globalisation is 'other' than everyday experience; a site of 'displacement'.⁶⁴ It is perhaps because of this kind of 'locality' that the Biennale can be seen to embody something of the potential for biennials (that inevitably instantiate globalisation) to momentarily claim a particular form of both local and global culture.

⁶² Hanru, 2005, pp. 57-62.

⁶³ Hanru, 2005, p. 57. Appadurai, 1996, pp. 31, 184-186.

⁶⁴ Hanru, 2005, pp. 61-62.



Fig. 13. Mike Parr, *MIRROR/ARSE*, 2008. Installation of 14 videos, all images courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney and Melbourne. (Bottom three photographs by Jenni Carter.)

Art-Politics Dialectic: Shifting Perception

As Christov-Bakargiev has stated, the contradiction contained in and exposed with her theme 'Revolutions – Forms That Turn' played with notions of art's autonomy and politicality, and this can be discussed in terms of an 'art-politics dialectic'.⁶⁵ Uncertainty and confusion about the politicality (or not) of biennials is particularly seen in the critical discussions around Documenta 11, perhaps the most notable for its politics since the 1993 Whitney Biennial. As was noted by Kelly in relation to the 1993 Whitney Biennial, it may be possible for critics to make a 'false choice' between art and politics predicated on a belief that art is either aesthetic and autonomous, or political.⁶⁶ Documenta 11 was criticised by some critics for privileging the 'political' over the artistic, while other critics saw its art as political but still functioning as 'art'.⁶⁷ Responding to such a situation, Christov-Bakargiev was able to explore what Kelly describes as the 'political autonomy' of art; a term intended to catalyse an exploration of the interrelationship of art and politics and the different ways that might be explored and embodied.⁶⁸ Within her constellations Christov-Bakargiev related works that appeared to be more political in and of themselves with works that appeared more formally and aesthetically autonomous.⁶⁹ By relating them all to 'revolution', or what she described as perceptual 'forms of displacement', she ultimately embraced the politicality of artists' formal gestures without suggesting those artists are necessarily concerned with making 'political' art.⁷⁰

Christov-Bakargiev's play between politics and aesthetics was particularly notable within the kinetically-charged 'suspension' constellation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in which, as writer and editor Anthony Gardner has also observed, two groups of 'mobiles' in connecting rooms compared different, yet related, notions of politicality and autonomy.⁷¹ In one room Cattelan's taxidermied horse and Rodchenko's spatial constructions suggested the political weight of socio-political revolutions as well as the embodiment and activation of a socio-political consciousness in new forms of art. By contrast, in the next room, Alexander Calder's mobiles moved gently to cast delicate shadows while Olafur Eliasson's *Light Ventilator Mobile* (2002) turned somewhat erratically to create circular tracks of light around the room (Fig. 14). Such works seemed more occupied with an aesthetics of movement than 'politics'. Yet perhaps the play they initiated between subject and object 'shifted' a viewer's consciousness of their mobility and dynamism, as stated by Eliasson in relation to his own practice.⁷² In this way, they achieve a kind of perceptual 'form of displacement' relevant to Christov-Bakargiev's exploration of art and politics.

⁶⁵ See, for example: Alexander, 2008, p. 88. Christov-Bakargiev, 2008c: <http://artipedia.org/artsnews/exhibitions/2008/06/17/16th-biennale-of-sydney-Grevolutions-forms-that-turn-2/>; accessed April 21, 2009.

⁶⁶ Kelly, 2000, p. 222.

⁶⁷ Stengel and Scharf, 2005, pp. 113-4.

⁶⁸ Kelly, 2000, p. 224.

⁶⁹ Phillips, 2008.

⁷⁰ King, 2008: <http://speechinterviews.blogspot.com/2008/04/carolyn-christov-bakargiev-with-natalie.html>; accessed April 21, 2009.

⁷¹ Gardner, 2008, p. 53.

⁷² Obirst, 2002: <http://www.olafureliasson.net/publications-texts.html>; accessed April 27, 2009.

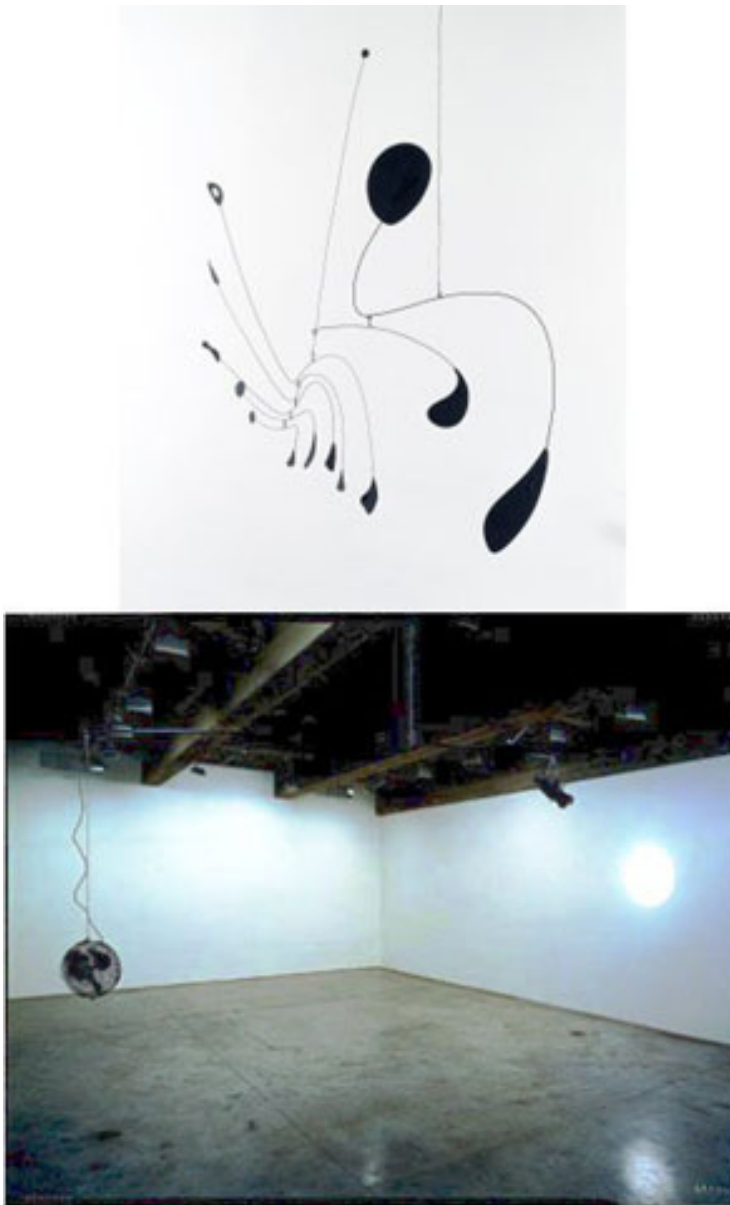


Fig. 14. Alexander Calder, *Hanging Spider*, c.1940. Painted sheet metal and wire, 125.7 x 90.2 cm., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph by Jerry L. Thomson. © Alexander Calder/ARS. Licensed by VISCOPY 2009. Olafur Eliasson, *Light Ventilator Mobile*, 2002. Fan, spotlight, cable, sliding contact, collection of Debra and Dennis Scholl, Miami Beach, courtesy of the artist.



Fig 15. Installation detail, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Léon Ferrari, *Western Christian Civilization*, 1965. Plastic, oil and plaster, 200 x 120 x 60 cm, collection Alicia and Léon Ferrari, Buenos Aires. (Photograph by Ramiro Larrain.) Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, *Senza titolo o Rotolo di piturra industriale*, 1958. Mixed media on canvas roll, 74.5 x 7400 cm, courtesy Archivio Gallizio, Turin. (Photograph by Jenni Carter.)



Fig. 16. Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, 1973. Black and white film, 87:54 mins, images courtesy of Ken Knabb, *Complete Cinematic Works*, (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2003). Attila Csörgő, *Slanting Water*, 1995. Black and white photograph 28 x 40 cm, courtesy Galerija Gregor Podnar, Berlin/Ljubljana.

Art and politics were also notably related on the ground floor of the exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art. On entry, Léon Ferrari's previously censored *Western Christian Civilization*, 1965, with its visible attack on militarism as a defence of Christian and Western values, played off Situationist Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio's 'industrial painting'. With this long roll of painted canvas, *Untitled (Roll of Industrial Painting)*, 1958, Pinot-Gallizio engaged in the Situationist practice of *détournement* (which roughly translates as 'diversion' or 'subversion').⁷³ *Détournement* involves diverting or derailing the materials, routines and sign-systems of capitalism, in this instance through deployment of the production line to create paintings by the metre (Fig. 15).⁷⁴ Guy Debord's film *La Société du Spectacle* (1973), based on his book of the same name, also utilised *détournement* in the collaging of photos, news-clips, advertisements and sequences from pre-existing films. These Situationist works were flanked by a large room dedicated solely to Attila Csörgő's small photograph of *Slanting Water* (1995). In this work the artist suspends a viewer's common sense, as he stated during the Biennale's Symposium, by 'changing [their] reality system' or 'psychological co-ordinates' (Fig. 16).⁷⁵ Again, Christov-Bakargiev played with notions of art that might be seen as more obviously 'political' or 'aesthetic', suggesting differences but also parallels and, ultimately, the necessary, unavoidable and significant interplay of both.

Christov-Bakargiev's approach to this terrain recalled that of Jacques Rancière, specifically as outlined in his influential text *The Politics of Aesthetics* as well as his later readings of 'spaces of play'.⁷⁶ A biennial may become a model by which to visualise the idea that aesthetic activity enlarges the scope of political possibility. Art functions politically without necessarily being 'about' politics.⁷⁷ As Christov-Bakargiev related, she was interested in 'the politics of the language of art rather than the language of politics'.⁷⁸ An aesthetic politics reconfigures given perceptual forms, creating new modes of sense perception through which an individual's 'world' can be understood and, perhaps, changed.⁷⁹ In this context, political works of art operate by suspending the ordinary co-ordinates of sensory experience. In addition, as seen in what could be called the Biennale's spaces of 'dialectical play' — its exploration and heightening of an individual's experience of contradiction through the dialectics I have proposed — a dedication to aesthetic politics is, as suggested by Rancière, able to reframe accepted networks of meanings. In line with Rancière's view, 'Revolutions – Forms that Turn' was able to disrupt logical relationships between what is commonly seen and thought of as 'political'. Art was able to be seen as a play

⁷³ Plant, 1992, p. 86.

⁷⁴ Plant, 1992, pp. 86, 88-89. Hopkins, 2000, p. 164.

⁷⁵ Csörgő, 2008.

⁷⁶ For Christov-Bakargiev's mention of her intent to mobilise Rancière's politics of aesthetics see King, 2008: <http://speechinterviews.blogspot.com/2008/04/carolyn-christov-bakargiev-with-natalie.html>; accessed April 21, 2009; Clement, 2008a: <http://www.artlink.com.au/articles.cfm?id=3083>; accessed April 21, 2009, and Begg, 2008, p. 17. Christov-Bakargiev also mentioned 'the politics of aesthetics' or Rancière at several fora including her public lecture (Christov-Bakargiev, 2008d), her after hours lobby talk at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (Christov-Bakargiev, 2008e), and the Artspace forum (Christov-Bakargiev, 2008f). For Rancière's theory of the politics of aesthetics see Rancière, 2004, but also see the more recent special edition of *Artforum* dedicated to the philosopher's theory and its mobilisation in the work of contemporary artists. Rancière is interviewed and a number of artists provide texts. (Carnevale and Kelsey, 2007, p. 263.)

⁷⁷ For a lucid discussion of Rancière's theory in this regard see Kanouse, 2007, pp. 25, 35.

⁷⁸ Christov-Bakargiev, 2008d.

⁷⁹ Rancière, 2004, p. 63. Kanouse, 2007, p. 25.

between opposites; between the readability of a 'message' and a perceptual effect that resists the communication of a particular 'message'.⁸⁰

It is perhaps through the recognition and understanding of the contradictory nature of biennials that such 'spaces of play' can be created to more meaningfully explore the complexity and irreducibility of contemporary art in an international context. Consideration of contradiction or dialectics, which can at least be considered as interaction between the seemingly opposed concepts of modernism and postmodernism, the local and the global and art and politics, could form the basis of a framework for analysis of biennials such as the 16th Biennale of Sydney. Further, as was seen in Christov-Bakargiev's curation of the Biennale, playing up contradiction opens a field of questions regarding the nature, status and effect of contemporary art and can create an experience that shifts collective and individual ways of thinking about history, art and politics.

The Biennale's presentation of historical and contemporary works instantiated a modernity-postmodernity dialectic. A constellation of constellations indebted to a radical modernist impulse, created a dynamic interplay between a broad range of works and opened a shared space for radicality and scepticism at the level of the individual. Particularly through the site of Cockatoo Island, the Biennale also leveraged and extrapolated from the local context to create an 'elsewhere' for collective and personal exploration of socio-cultural entrapment and emancipation. The Biennale could be seen to instantiate a local-global dialectic particularly relevant to Hou Hanru's concept of a biennial as its own 'locality' other than an everyday experience of globalisation. In relation to aesthetics and politics, the Biennale instantiated an art-politics dialectic that resonated with Rancière's concept of *The Politics of Aesthetics*, recognising the significant and unavoidable tension and interplay between gesture and 'message' in contemporary art. The 16th Biennale of Sydney highlights the potentiality of biennials to function as modern and postmodern, local and global, political and aesthetic; as forms of contradiction.

Jodie Dalglish is a curator and writer who recently completed an Honours-level dissertation at The University of Otago, New Zealand. Her dissertation, 'Negotiating Contradiction: the Biennial and Contemporary Curating', was, in part, based on a three week site visit to and analysis of the 16th Biennale of Sydney in 2008.

⁸⁰ Rancière, 2004, p. 63.

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