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Grasping the Thistle

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In the time allocated for questions at the close of a session titled ‘Art, Autonomy and Hospitality: Networks, Transmission and Locality’ in the June *Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney* symposium ‘Biennales, Cosmopolitanism and Locality’ at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, I had a question to ask. In the course of the session the tilt towards curatorial rather than artistic practice had become pretty clear, with far-flung interpretations by panellists to the plainly over-packed topic. My question outlined that I’d been attracted to this session by its hum of particular buzzwords - ‘hospitality’, ‘networks’, ‘transmission’ and ‘locality’ - and that I’d likewise heard the word ‘inclusive’ in the air a lot over the last few days of *Zones of Contact* openings and events. I was interested to hear thoughts, particularly from the Sydney-based panellists, as to how these principles might actually be put into practice in light of the insignificant inclusion of Sydney artists in this Biennale of Sydney. After a pause the session moderator turned to the panel and asked, ‘Right, who’d like to grasp that thistle?’

It’s curious that the question of the participation of visual artists living and working in the self-same city in which a large contemporary visual arts event is regularly staged should be characterised as a prickly one. *Zones of Contact* featured one Sydney-based artist amongst seven Australians out of the total eighty-five artists and collaborations participating in the 2006 exhibition platform. This of course reflects the Biennale of Sydney’s founding and consistent motivation to ‘open up the world to people’¹ by transporting a significant quantity of recent international practice to Australia for the benefit of local audiences. Yet given the ten years or so since the emergence of relational modes of practice - artistic & curatorial - that invoke hosting, network building and interpersonal exchange as ways of working, how does the Biennale of Sydney observe and engage its own locality? In what ways does the biennale platform facilitate meeting points between its cast of visiting international artists and the community of practitioners in the city in which it occurs? It’s a shame to say that at this most literal ground level application, *Zones of Contact* did no such thing.

¹ Charles Merewether, interviewed by Joanna Mendelsohn in ‘Charles Merewether and the 2006 Biennale of Sydney’ *Artlink* vol. 26 no. 2 2006 p.21.

If not for the clashing irony of the title, perhaps this Biennale would have rocked in and out of town fostering little more than the usual ambivalence from the local artist community. On a number of occasions² I heard *Zones of Contact* pitched as a very ‘inclusive’ biennale. This was indeed warranted on account of its new reach to venues in the outer Sydney centres of Campbelltown and Blacktown and its presentation of work by artists from countries little represented previously on the biennale circuit, such as those of the Middle East and the Balkans. In other words inclusive of audiences and increasingly inclusive of international artists. But meanwhile the potential for the thoughtful contextualisation of the work of local artists with those of their overseas contemporaries slid right off the map.

In the late 1970’s this exact same scenario of international bias and the inadequate inclusion of Australian artists as well as the issue of under-representation of women’s practices was met not with ambivalence but direct organising and lobbying for reform by Sydney artists and their interstate peers³. Rationalising that the significant amount of public money spent should oblige the event to reflect the art community’s needs, excerpts from letters to 1979 Biennale of Sydney director Nick Waterlow read: ‘We cannot stress too strongly our concern that while a major international exhibition is to be held in Sydney Australian artists are to appear in an ancillary, complementary way to an exhibition that should be highlighting and not downgrading their talents’.⁴ And that: ‘The importance of the Sydney Biennale is that it is a unique venue, not only for Australians, but also for people from overseas, to view recent Australian art in conjunction with recent international art’.⁵

Save for the long-lapsed practice of artists’ collective industrial organising, the consistencies with the present are clear. In 1979 the demand for an equal number of Australian artists to match the core group of international artists struggled to gain ground, and in 2006 the scenario of minimal local

² For instance in the opening speech at the Museum of Contemporary Art by director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor and the omnipresent tones of artistic director and curator Charles Merewether emanating from the ‘interactive’ Comfort Zones stationed in various venues.

³ Detailed in the text by Vivienne Binns and Ian Milliss ‘History/Herstory’ assisted in parts by The Women’s Art Group, *Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring: Comments from the Art Community 1979* published online in the retrospective documents of Ian Milliss at <<http://www.ianmilliss.com/documents/historyherstory.htm>>

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

participation looked similar.⁶ This was then thrown into vivid relief by the Biennale of Sydney's use of a quote from 1990 artistic director & curator René Block for the publicising of his keynote address for *Zones of Contact*:

I personally think that a biennale should become a workshop for contemporary art...Biennales are more a chance for encounters between local and international artists, so that they can work and exchange together. These are the most important aspects of the biennales.⁷

The choice of Block as a prominent framing voice to this biennale was an interesting one given the evident contradictions between his curatorial practice and that of Charles Merewether. In her introduction to Block's presentation at the Museum of Contemporary Art Elizabeth Ann Macgregor noted 'the possibility for encounters between local and international artists as the hallmark of his curation'.

A key distinction between Block and Merewether can be noted in quotes from each regarding their preparation for their respective curatorial endeavours. Block, discussing his work on four different contemporary biennials including the 8th Biennale of Sydney *The Readymade Boomerang*, emphasised his intention for that exhibition to show artists from Sydney and other Australian cities in dialogue with artists from all over the world. And that it had been important for him to live in Sydney and formulate its concept from here. In comparison, in his *Zones of Contact* catalogue essay Merewether asserts that 'the Biennale of Sydney 2006 was composed on the road'.⁸

⁶ Though happily not the issue of adequate representation of female artists, the '70's working groups having achieved partial success by securing 50% women out of the included Australian artists, which can be seen as more or less consistent in 2006. While the bigger picture of *Zones of Contact* revealed a rare instance where women artists formed the majority and, further, a notably high level of participation of women aged in their late twenties and early thirties. Three times the amount of male artists in this age bracket. Of course this pertained to the international artists only. It's quite a stretch to imagine that a 28 year old, early career Australian female artist (let alone a number of them!) would be granted such a measure of esteem and confidence in her practice.

⁷ René Block 'Le Devoir', October 4th 2002, quoted in information on the Biennale Symposia Series 2006 on the *Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney* website, <<http://www.bos2006.com>>.

⁸ Charles Merewether, 'Taking Place: Acts of Survival for a Time to Come' in Merewehter, Ewen McDonald and Luke Parker (eds), *Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney* exhibition catalogue, Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, 2006, p.49.

Merewether, an Australian whose practice has been largely conducted overseas, was interviewed by most local arts publications to coincide with the *Zones of Contact* opening. From *Artlink* we learnt that 'his long absence from Australia meant he was not a part of any local faction. "I think it's an advantage in not having lived here for 20 years that I can be inclusive."'9 Responding to a question of his rationale for the selection of Australian artists in *Broadsheet* he says:

The seven artists selected came at the end of a long process of research and looking in various parts of Australia. I made the decision at the end of having chosen the artists from elsewhere. This maximised my time to understand better the local scene but also provided a stage onto which Australian artists would be participating both in terms of correlations and differences vis-à-vis the framework of *Zones of Contact*.¹⁰

This articulation of distance from the Sydney/Australian arts community, together with the selection of local artists secondarily to terms established by the practices of overseas artists, spoke of an insistent locating of culture as 'elsewhere' to Australia (otherwise known as cultural cringe). And went some way to explaining how it was that only one Sydney artist might end up participating in the Biennale of Sydney.

By way of comparative example, the lone Melbourne International Biennial, *Signs of Life*, in 1999 featured a total of fifty-six artists & collaborations, thirteen of which were Australian and in turn ten of those artists were living and working in Melbourne. In fact it's hard to imagine a Melbourne event being anything but Melbourne loud and proud. *Signs of Life* gave the strong impression of engaging a local community of artists across the multiple and visible fronts of exhibition, public programs and employment. Likewise the Artists' Week program that features prominently in each Adelaide Festival of the Arts situates the voices of South Australian artists in discursive forums alongside their interstate and international counterparts. So, what's the hang-up with Sydney? Until the statements that insist on the value of exchange and dialogue between local and international artists¹¹ are matched with an

⁹ Charles Merewether, quoted in Mendelssohn, op.cit., p.19.

¹⁰ Alan Cruickshank, 'Interview: Charles Merewether' *Broadsheet*, vol.35, no. 2, p.75.

¹¹ Such as 'the aim of...The Biennale of Sydney...is to foster and provide the opportunity to see local culture within a broader context. This enhances dialogue and exchange between local and

active inclusion of Sydney artists in platforms like *Zones of Contact*, they will stand as plainly empty rhetoric, hollowed out of both meaning and sincerity.

When local artists are not engaged alongside their international peers at the equal and empowered level of consideration of their conceptual and material practices, the nearest equivalent to participation seems to become the attendance of the biennale exhibition openings and artists' party. But this is hampered by the aura of exclusivity that institutions like the Biennale of Sydney and the Museum of Contemporary Art like to preserve by making these invitation only, ticketed events. Accordingly local artists are left to scrounge for tickets, and forced to measure their relevance against their peers by their ability to secure an invitation or party ticket. *Zones of Contact* was unique to my experience of such occasions in that *no* Sydney-based artists I knew were issued a ticket to the artists' party at Pier 2/3 in advance of opening night. Unaffiliated visiting overseas artists on-the-make and every curator, dealer and his dog filed into the 'must-attend event for Australia's art community'¹² ticket in hand. While clots of local artists mobilised on the footpath to scrape and connive - myself included - their way into a party that turned out to not even be defending a Shangri-la of free drinking ; perversely it was running record inflation on its bar prices.

Pretty much everything about this event seemed tailored to inhibit accessibility, from the aggressive door policy to the reputed existence of a VIP room.¹³ Leaving local practitioners in the familiar position of speculating the logic of an artists' party where the chances of meeting a visiting artist are little to none. As a fellow artist observed the next day: 'What's the point of needing a ticket to a party when you're just hanging out with people you see all the time anyway?' I also heard that in comparison to the invite-only policy of the MCA, the Art Gallery of New South Wales had freely admitted entrance to anyone off the street at its *Zones of Contact* opening event. This is more in keeping with my experience of the attitude to opening events at museums and Kunstvereins in Germany, where I was astounded to be able to wander freely into the openings of major exhibitions without having to negotiate any security guards or ticket inspectors. Shrugging off the Australian

international artists or writers, and cultural life of the city and its residents' Cruickshank, op.cit., p.73.

¹² Press brochure, *Zones of Contact: 2006 Biennale of Sydney* website, <<http://www.bos2006.com>>.

¹³ As reported by *The Art Life* <<http://www.artlife.blogspot.com>>. I was unaware of this at the time, but it's consistent with the VIP area that was maintained at the artists' party for the 2004 Biennale of Sydney at the Arthouse Hotel.

attachment to cultural gatekeeping and loosening these legislative social constructs of prestige could be good starting points in the facilitation of genuine ground level dialogue and exchange.

Whilst the work of Sydney artists was largely invisible in the exhibition *Zones of Contact* itself, the contribution of the local community was absolutely critical at the level of labour. Four weeks out from the opening many artists I knew were working building walls at venues like Pier 2/3 and continued to work on the installation and realisation of the artworks of visiting artists up to the opening. Practicing artists typically bring a lot of skill, generosity and empathy to this work that is rarely reflected in their rate of pay or acknowledgement from their employers.¹⁴ And often the demands of the physical manifestation of artwork leaves these artists exhausted and disengaged from an exhibition's framework of ideas. Though remunerated labour is less of a concern than the Biennale of Sydney's demonstrated dependence on volunteerism. Two days prior to the media preview of the exhibition venues, frantic calls for volunteers to assist - particularly with the installation of Antony Gormley's work *Asian Field* - were put out to local artists. The pay-off for this labour was touted as a chance to work with the artist and a ticket to the exclusive artists' party on opening night.¹⁵ Events this time around suggested that the Biennale of Sydney holds the Sydney artist community first and foremost as a source of readily exploitable, behind-the-scenes labour.

The encounters and meeting points that *did* emerge between visiting and local artists on the occasion of *Zones of Contact* were typically initiated by artists at an intimate scale away from the circuit of formal biennale venues. Events like the artist talk and slide-show given by Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan at the Petersham Bowling Club as part of Lucas Ihlein's 'Bilateral Petersham' project established a genuine opportunity for an introduction to their practice, framed by sociability, conversation and lawn bowling. The Aquilizans also installed work in the artist-run Slot gallery, a street-front window space on Botany Rd in Redfern, during their time in Sydney. Likewise, with local facilitation Ujino Muneteru gave a rousing and milky performance of his Rotators project at the longstanding underground venue Club Kooky the week before his opening at Artspace. It was these smaller events that seemed to best maximise the phenomenon of having so many visiting artists in town, when

¹⁴ Though it was heartening to hear Elizabeth Ann Macgregor prominently thank and acknowledge the MCA installation crew in her opening speech, identifying many of them as artists themselves. Usually this acknowledgement falls somewhere after that of the corporate and alcohol sponsors.

¹⁵ Us gatecrashers deduced that saying you'd worked on the Antony Gormley was the most fitting and sure-fire route into the artists' party, whether you had or not.

activity could spill beyond the museums and galleries and across the actual fabric of the city, to be read in parallel with local practices in the spaces and neighbourhoods that many artists actually live and work in.

By contrast the spaces of dialogue opened up by the official *Zones of Contact* public programs were notable for their formality. Artist floor talks¹⁶ may well be informative and provide unique insight to audiences on the production and thinking behind a presented work. But their typical format of a monologue followed by brief questions and answers, in which the artist is frequently nervous or possibly requiring the assistance of an interpreter - as several *Zones of Contact* artists did - doesn't tend to engender a level of conversation that might lead to dialogue and exchange. Likewise, at the close of René Block's keynote address at the MCA, the billed 'response' from Charles Merewether was unforthcoming and no time was granted for questions from the audience. With such a lack of facilitation for critical response and enquiry it was hard to come away with any other sensation than that of having attended a bum-numbing sermon. Whether that of Block or Merewether, it seemed like the biennale's tendency to uphold the singular authorial voice acted as somewhat of an obstacle to generating diverse and dynamic discussion of its platform for contemporary visual art in a local context.

Back at question time at the close of the June symposium session my prickly question was duly responded to, even if the answers could have been more likened to variously sidestepping¹⁷, trampling¹⁸ and patronising¹⁹ the thistle rather than grasping it. And I was left none the wiser as to the significance of Sydney to the Biennale of Sydney, other than as a host city with a series of well-appointed venues for a culture sourced from 'elsewhere'. But gained the impression that some of

¹⁶ Billed as an opportunity to 'meet the artists' in BoS press material.

¹⁷ Museum of Contemporary Art senior curator Rachel Kent insisted that she was unable to comment, not having worked on *Zones of Contact*, but suggested attending meetings, lunches and talks.

¹⁸ Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre artistic director Nick Tsoutas asserted that the Biennale of Sydney was not a platform of inclusivity, was not responsible for representing Sydney artists, was a nationally organised international event that could be staged in any interchangeable city and had nothing to do with Sydney or its arts community. Probably all in one sentence. No one disagreed with him.

¹⁹ Australian Centre for Photography director Alasdair Foster suggested that the artworks themselves in *Zones of Contact* functioned as a 'conversation'. And that whilst local artists might not get to meet visiting artists, they got to meet the works.

Sydney's prominent curators and publicly funded gallery directors viewed this situation with an attitude of acquiescence.

Actually it's this secondary level of local arts institutions - the contemporary arts organisations - that could really be going in to bat for Sydney practitioners. And moreover, with their local knowledge they were entirely better placed than the Biennale of Sydney to facilitate meaningful meeting points between their exhibiting biennale artists and the Sydney artist community by, for example, hosting drinks and get-togethers, visits to artist-run projects and studios etc. In his introduction to the Artspace June-August 2006 program booklet executive director Blair French writes:

We welcome artists, art professionals and audiences visiting Sydney for the occasion of the Biennale. We hope you will take the time to engage also with the wealth of sophisticated, critical practice taking place locally within independent and artist-run initiatives, providing you with a depth of cultural context within which to approach the international event.

This was certainly a clearer articulation of support and faith in local practice than anything the biennale paraphernalia had to offer, but this appeal for awareness really needed to be matched with active and pragmatic gestures of facilitation. Meanwhile the irony of the Biennale of Sydney headquarters being accommodated in the Gunnery, the same building as Artspace and its studio residency program, was all too poignant. Being at such close range to a host of artists at work, this biennale still managed to emerge as though from a zone of quarantine rather than contact. It will be interesting to observe the development of Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's 2008 event, starting as she did by making visits and meetings with Sydney artists in their studios, projects and spaces her first, rather than last, priority.

The need for dialogue and counterpoints to aerate these issues of locality prompted by *Zones of Contact* was felt keenly. To coincide with the opening of the Biennale in June, Loose projects²⁰ coordinated an exhibition and publication project titled *Cones of Contact* featuring contributions from over sixty Sydney-based artists. In accompaniment Loose staged an informal forum to generate some artist-

²⁰ A Sydney artist-run project space of which I was a coordinating member.

driven discussion around points of relationship between art organisational platforms like biennales and ground level artist communities in the cities in which they occur. Despite a concerted effort to engage the participation of a visiting Biennale artist or two, the forum elapsed as a largely localised conversation, which nonetheless constructively canvassed points including the history of the Biennale of Sydney, what we might reasonably expect from state-sponsored arts events and alternative approaches and examples in the research and staging of large-scale exhibitions.

At one point Margaret Mayhem held up the *Zones of Contact* catalogue to the assembled group, pointing out the seven pages of government and corporate logos that take pride of place at the front of the publication. Before the text by the curator, let alone the work of the artists! ‘This is the community the Biennale creates’, she rightly observed. In the course of the forum it was lamented that the lack of inclusion of Sydney artists in this biennale should translate as a sense of exclusion, given we were all engaged in our own dynamic, autonomous and self-organising practices. I agreed that it was less about registering a sense of exclusion than one of wasted potential.

In his essay for the *Zones of Contact* catalogue independent critic and curator Hou Hanru writes that ‘continuous self-organisation is the principle behind the survival and continuum of a virus’.²¹ Likening the exposure to cultural difference packaged by international contemporary art events to a process of contamination, Hanru evokes biological virulence alongside the potency of self-organising practices, suggesting both as well placed to re-conceptualise and reinvent their given cultural contexts. At the close of the *Zones of Contact* forum at Loose those present agreed that the best of responses to *Zones of Contact* was to continue practicing at a generative and locally responsive level, being sure to leave networked traces of our communication that might ultimately accrue as the basis of local cultural change.

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lisa kelly. june 06.
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²¹ Hou Hanru ‘Zones of Contamination - some random notes on the current state of contemporary art events’ in Merewether, McDonald and Parker (eds), op.cit.,p.139.

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<<http://www.looseprojects.net>>

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<<http://www.artspace.org.au>>