

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

10 highlights from the 20th Biennale of Sydney

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Agatha Gothe-Snape with Brooke Stamp, 'Here, an Echo', 2016, a scored walk from Speaker's Corner to Wemyss Lane, 15 May 2016 for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy Belinda Piggott

Across the city and inner suburbs, seven discrete "Embassies of Thought" offer "safe spaces for thinking", as Stephanie Rosenthal writes in the **Biennale of Sydney** 2016 catalogue introduction. Themes explored in these embassies are not concerned with nationhood, but with a series of ideas being explored by artists today. Rosenthal connects these with her response to the unique history of each exhibition space to present 200 works, many by artists outside the traditional centres of the art world.

The Biennale officially runs from 18 March to 5 June 2016; however, like many of the works being exhibited, it is not contained. In September 2015 Rosenthal moved to Sydney and initiated talks, tours and public conversations, and the recently launched **Not Evenly Distributed** blog will continue until 30 June 2016.

The Biennale has been crafted to relate to location and theme with more than half the works having been commissioned. It is also highly accessible with some installations located outdoors, in the inner city, and performances, talks or workshops scheduled in any given week.

Due to the number of ephemeral works, the exhibition is not overwhelming. Within each venue there is space to engage with the objects and installations, consider them on their own merits or contemplate how they fit in with the themes the Artistic Director set out to explore.



Chiharu Shiota, 'Conscious Sleep', 2009_2016, beds, thread, dimensions variable. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney (2016) at Cockatoo Island. Image courtesy the artist.

1. Cockatoo Island, Embassy of the Real: Chiharu Shiota – *Conscious Sleep* (2016)

Formerly a convict settlement and shipyard, more recently Cockatoo Island has been a sought after location for movie making. This complex history led Rosenthal to consider what actually constitutes 'reality'. In the Biennale catalogue she poses the question, "If each era posits a different view of reality, what is ours?"

Entering the dimly lit dormitory in the former convict quarters the viewer's experience of reality is severely challenged. Berlin based, Japanese artist **Chiharu Shiota** has woven thousands of black threads into webs with no beginning or end. They appear to add alternative dimensions to the ceiling and walls. As the eyes adjust to the dreamlike space, a series of vertical beds, regularly placed along the walls, can be discerned.

In *Blouin Artinfo's* **online video** the artist explains that in the 1860s more than 170 prisoners inhabited the space. It would have been impossible to lie down in the confined space, if sleep happened at all, it would have been in an upright position. History is memorialised within the complex webs; Shiota literally draws connections between the viewer, space and time to suspend individual histories.



Lee Mingwei, 'Guernica in Sand', 2006_2016, mixed-media interactive installation; sand, wooden island, lighting 1300 x 643 cm. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney (2016) at Carriageworks. Image courtesy Belinda Piggott.



Lee Mingwei, 'Guernica in Sand', 2006_2016, mixed-media interactive installation; sand, wooden island, lighting 1300 x 643 cm. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney (2016) at Carriageworks. Image courtesy Belinda Piggott.

2. Carriageworks, Embassy of Disappearance: Lee Mingwei – *Guernica in Sand* (2006/2016)

This embassy is concerned with ideas relating to disappearances that occur as a result of change. Loss of language, species, tradition or values are seemingly inevitable; however, Rosenthal notes, the power of art is to "recapture something that is lost and thus save it from annihilation". Disappearance, or transformation, is a process that can be witnessed in a number of the works on site.



Lee Mingwei, 'Guernica in Sand', 2006_2016, mixed-media interactive installation; sand, wooden island, lighting 1300 x 643 cm. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney (2016) at Carriageworks. Image courtesy Belinda Piggott.

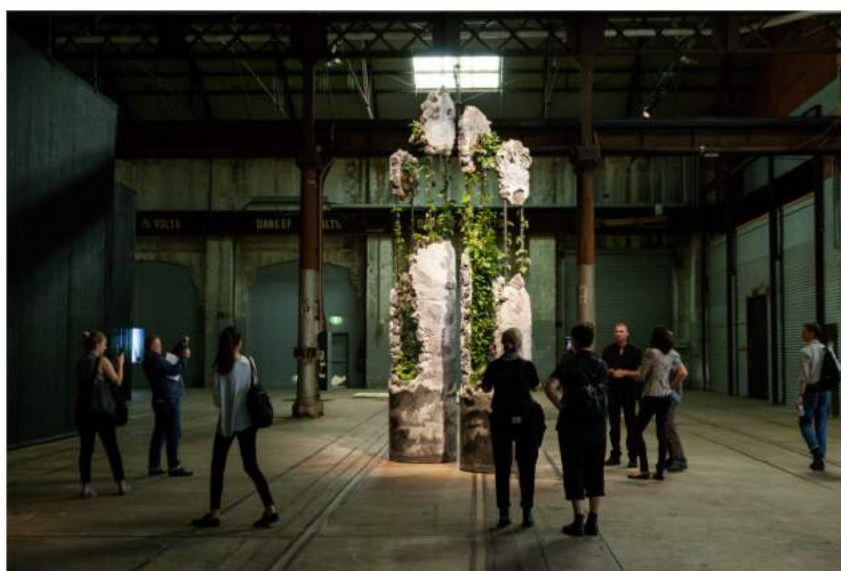
Taiwanese-American artist **Lee Mingwei** has recreated Picasso's best-known work *Guernica*. Presented as a monumental sand painting, at the midway point of the Biennale, Lee invited members of the public to walk across the work. Following this, the artist and his assistants swept the image away with bamboo brooms. The result of this gesture is an abstract work that masks, yet embodies, the original. In the catalogue the artist explains,

I wanted to use the concept of impermanence as a lens for focusing on such violent events in terms of the ongoing phenomena of destruction and creation.

He explains that the material of sand reflects this notion; it is in a constant state of flux. Changing from sand to rock and back to sand with the effects of the elements.



Lee Mingwei, 'Guernica in Sand', 2006_2016, mixed-media interactive installation; sand, wooden island, lighting 1300 x 643 cm. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney (2016) at Carriageworks. Image courtesy Belinda Piggott.



Jamie North, 'Succession', 2016, cement, steel, steel slag, coal ash, oyster shell, organic matter, various Australian native plants, dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

3. Carriageworks, Embassy of Disappearance: Jamie North – *Succession* (2016)

Sydney-based artist Jamie North's living sculptural installation explores the tension between man-made structures and nature. Sensitive to the architecture of **Carriageworks**, he installed eroded columns made from steel slag, an industrial bi-product that was combined with Australian native plant seedlings. The species selected, Kangaroo Grape and Port Jackson Fig, thrive in low light and artificial conditions. These are the plants that emerge on building facades and cracks in the footpath. As in the urban environment, over time, the plants will consume his sculpture, replicating the decomposition and renewal that occurs in nature.



Lauren Brincat, *Salt Lines: Play It As It Sounds – Performance Instruments*, 2015-2016. Commissioned for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery. Image courtesy Shauna Greyerbiehl.



Lauren Brincat, *Salt Lines: Play It As It Sounds – Performance Instruments*, 2015-2016. Commissioned for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery. Image courtesy Shauna Greyerbiehl.

4. Carriageworks, Embassy of Disappearance: Lauren Brincat – *Salt Lines: Play It As It Sounds, Performance Instruments* (2015-2016)

On any given day the elegant white sailcloth of *Salt Lines* reveals a new form as Sydney artist **Lauren Brincat** selects someone to reconfigure her work. By adjusting the custom-made church bell ropes and finely crafted red woolen handgrips, the voluminous folds can be infinitely redistributed. The subject of the work are the nebulous geographic borders, salt lines that exist across oceans – the bodies of water that connect and divide the planet. The work has a sense of the sublime, suggesting the rhythmical movements of tides. It is also vast, uncontained and absorbing.



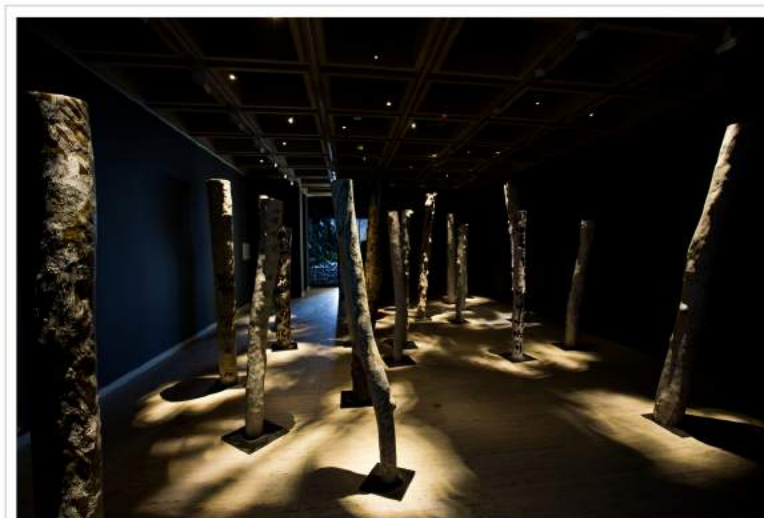
Lauren Brincat, Salt Lines: Play It As It Sounds – Performance Instruments, 2015- 2016. Commissioned for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery. Image courtesy Shauna Greyerbiehl.



Lauren Brincat, Salt Lines: Play It As It Sounds – Performance Instruments, 2015- 2016. Commissioned for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery. Image courtesy Shauna Greyerbiehl.

5. Art Gallery of NSW, Embassy of Spirits: Nyapanyapa Yunupingu – *Bathala* (2012)

The location of Embassy of Spirits acknowledges the local Aboriginal people, the Gadigal, as the gallery sits near an important traditional ceremony ground. Art exhibited here investigates how religion and spirituality are meaningful today, and the experience of spirituality in a more abstract sense.



Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, 'Bathala', 2012, natural earth pigments on hollow log, 257 x 30 x 30 cm. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney (2016) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Image courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley.

In the time it takes for the eyes to adjust to the low light of Yirrkala artist **Nyapanyapa Yunupingu's** installation, the body has calmed and the mind is more receptive. Evoking a eucalyptus forest at midnight, the dim light requires the viewer to walk through slowly, contemplating the space punctuated by tree trunks. Each has its own personality. While stripped of foliage and branches, every sway, curve and nobble is maintained and empathetically decorated to complement the form. Unexpectedly these are not like the more uniform *larriktj*, memorial poles artists from Yirrkala are renowned for. Another surprise is the meditative markings are not related to sacred Dreamtime stories, but a significant personal narrative. This is a significant shift in the local tradition of art making, however innovation has long been a hallmark of the area.

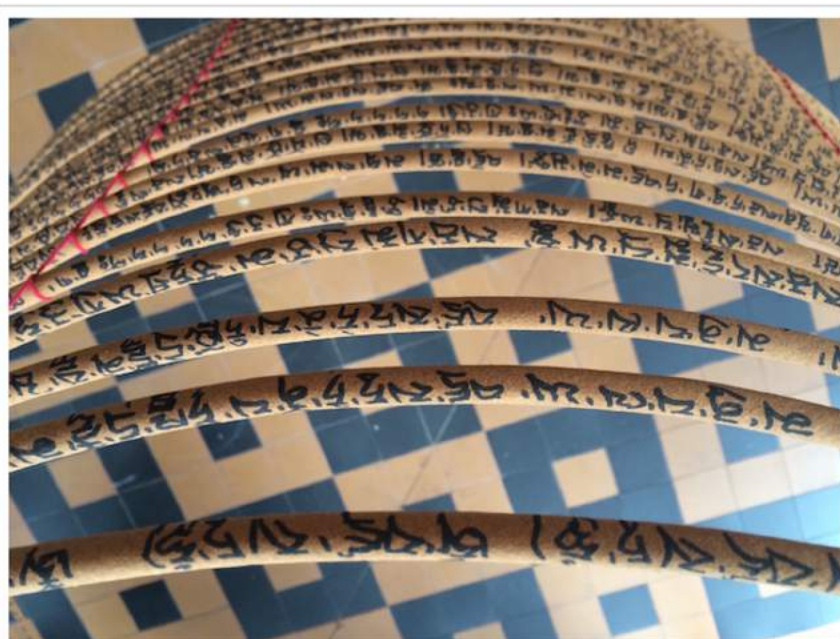


Taro Shinoda, 'Abstraction of Confusion', 2016, clay, pigment, ochre, tatami mats, dimensions variable. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney (2016) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Image courtesy Belinda Pigott.

6. Art Gallery of NSW, Embassy of Spirits: Taro Shinoda, *Abstraction of Confusion* (2016)

The other immersive installation at Embassy of Spirits requires the viewer to perform the ritual of removing their shoes before climbing stairs to a tatami covered 'engawa', viewing platform. Only five people at a time can enter the space, a room clad in white clay. In the absence of colour the eyes become quiet, sounds are absorbed and the lingering earthy smell is comforting. Over time as the clay dries, sections crack and fall to the ground revealing a dark red lining.

The meditation space is **Taro Shinoda's** response to time spent at Yirrkala, Yunupingu's homeland, the clay used is the same material used for body and bark painting. Shinoda was expecting to connect with spirituality of Yirrkala, instead, as he explains on *Blouin Artinfo's* **online video**, he left profoundly confused. The tension between Indigenous Australia and the West is palpable, a condition he compares to when the West imposed itself on Japan over 200 years ago, since then Japan has absorbed the foreign culture.



Charwei Tsai, 'Spiral Incense - Hundred Syllable Mantra', 2016, spiral incense made of herbal materials dimensions variable. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney (2016) at Mortuary Station. Image courtesy Belinda Piggott.

7. Mortuary Station, Embassy of Transition: Charwei Tsai, *Spiral Incense – Hundred Syllable Mantra* (2016)

Once used as the departure point for the dead and their mourners to travel to Rookwood cemetery, Gothic style Mortuary Station was abandoned in 1930s. Taiwanese artist **Charwei Tsai** whose work is concerned with the idea of impermanence has reinvigorated the site with a series of works. The installation contemplates the Buddhist notion of Bardo, the transitional stage between two lives on earth.

Text is projected onto the floor of coffin-shaped waiting rooms onto the floor relating to this process of transition. Spirals of incense hanging from the platform ceiling burn throughout the day. Each of these has been hand inscribed with excerpts from the *The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo*, the Tibetan script read to the deceased to encourage them to let go of their attachment to life. Visitors are invited to contribute by writing a message to a loved one on a leaf or seed and leaving it on the train line.



Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, 'The Unreliable Narrator', 2014-15, two-channel video, 17 mins. Installation view (2016) at Artspace for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Image courtesy the artists. Photograph: Document Photography.

8. Artspace, Embassy of Non-Participation: Karen Mirza and Brad Butler – *The Unreliable Narrator* (2014-2015)

For over 30 years, Artspace has operated as an alternative space dedicated to exhibiting experimental art. British artists Mirza and Butler have taken over the entire venue for "The Museum of Non-Participation". The installation is a series of challenging, conceptual works that questions power, privilege and uneven distribution of resources, a fundamental theme of the Biennale.

The Unreliable Narrator is a film that explores the 2008 Mumbai attacks from a variety of unexpected perspectives. Actual CCTV footage is combined with recordings of telephone conversations between the attackers and their controllers and clips from some of the Bollywood movies that depict the event. These are overlaid with the voice of a narrator, an entity whose authority is generally assumed to be reliable. In this case doubts are raised notably when the attackers are referred to as "young, muscly [...] handsome". The artists happened to be in Pakistan when the attacks occurred in 2008, giving them a unique position to witness various commentaries. Their response to this is absorbing and memorable.



Daniel Boyd, 'What Remains', 2016, site-specific installation, mirrored disks, synthetic polymer paint, dimensions variable. Installation view (2016) at the corner of Vine Street and Eveleigh Street Redfern for the 20th Biennale of Sydney.

9. Everleigh St Redfern, In-between Space: Daniel Boyd, *What Remains* (2016)

In addition to the Embassies of Thought, works are located in streets, parks and public spaces in the inner city. Stephanie Rosenthal writes in the catalogue that

with our growing dependence on the virtual world of the Internet, the distinction between that world and the physical one is becoming ever less distinct. Many artists are attempting to access the 'in-between', the place where the virtual and physical world fold into one another.

The Block in Redfern has long been the centre of urban Indigenous culture and activism. Until recent gentrification, some of the suburb was perceived as off limits to all except locals and their guests so walking through the area is a new experience for many visitors. Across the road from Tony Mundine's *Boxing Gym* is the work of Sydney-based artist **Daniel Boyd**, a Queenslander of Kudjila/Gangalu heritage. A black wall is covered with over 12,000 small, mirrored dots. The dots reflect the environment and comings and goings of the neighborhood; the image reflected is multiplied and fractured and can't be comprehended. Those familiar with Boyd's work will recognise his signature aesthetic, monochrome tones overlaid with pixelating dots, or lenses that interrupt and add a layer of mystery.



Agatha Gothe-Snape with Brooke Stamp, 'Here, an Echo', 2016, a scored walk from Speaker's Corner to Wemyss Lane, 15 May 2016 for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy Belinda

10. In-between space: Agatha Gothe-Snape – *Here, an Echo* (2016)

This work is an ideal example of the Artistic Director's process-led approach to the Biennale not constrained by time. In a series of public events **Agatha Gothe-Snape**, in collaboration with choreographer **Brooke Stamp**, leads people along pathways of the inner city, from Speakers Corner in Sydney's Domain to Wemyss Lane in Surry Hills. The journey is punctuated by dance and readings relating to the area. The dance, score and document are a work in progress developed over time, combining the tours with conversations between artists and local stakeholders, Indigenous people, business operators and passers-by. At the end of the Biennale the process will be distilled into a number of short phrases that record what the artist refers to as the 'ambience of space'. *Here, an Echo*, has been selected as the Biennale Legacy Artwork and will become part of the City of Sydney's permanent collection. The phrases will be installed on the walls of Wemyss Lane.