

# THE CONVERSATION



## A surprising spectacle rescues the Sydney Biennale from irrelevance

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Sydney Biennale has recovered from the missteps of 2014. Lee Mingwei, Guernica in Sand. Image courtesy of JUT Museum and Sydney Biennale.

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The 19th Biennale of Sydney in 2014 was a disappointment that bordered on disaster.

Five of the selected artists boycotted the event because one of the major sponsors, Transfield Holdings, had a stake in a company operating the Manus Island detention centre. The Arts Minister, George Brandis, threatened to punish the Australia Council for supporting the Biennale and, perhaps most importantly, the show itself was incoherent with few memorable highlights.

This was a historic low point for the biennale since its inauguration in 1973, when Prime Minister Gough Whitlam had fanned the flames of enthusiasm for the arts.

However, it survived and the 20th Biennale of Sydney, with its curious title – *The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed* - has just opened.

The German-trained, London-based artistic director, Stephanie Rosenthal, has curated an engaging cultural event boasting over 80 artists from 34 countries. There are six main venues, one minor venue and quite a number of other spaces scattered throughout the city.

Rosenthal's main concept is that today's reality is closely interwoven with the virtual world of the internet and much occurs in the "in-between" space, where the virtual and the physical worlds overlap. It is these spaces that are being explored in the biennale.



Lee Bull, *Willing To Be Vulnerable*. Image courtesy of the Sydney Biennale.

To organise thematically the vast array of assembled material, Rosenthal has conceived of seven thematic groupings, with porous boundaries, which she has termed “embassies of thought”.

She explains these as “safe places for thinking” and expands on the idea of an embassy as a “state within a state”, where the host country tolerates the presence of a foreign power on its territory.

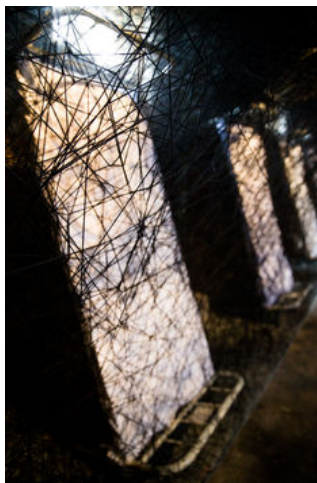
It is not a particularly satisfactory demarcation and many of the artists could happily co-exist in many, if not in most, of the embassies. The nine in-between spaces, mainly to accommodate artists who could make the most of the disparate locations, are scattered throughout Redfern, Chippendale, Surry Hills, the Royal Botanical Gardens and in the Camperdown Cemetery.

Cockatoo Island, ever since it became a venue for the biennale in 2008, has remained a wondrous surreal playground, where the setting frequently dwarfs the exhibits. This year, it has become an Embassy of the Real, with over 20 artists exhibiting there.

The Korean artist, Lee Bul, with her ‘Labyrinth’, presents a large, immersive installation that is impressive for scale, if not for the resolution of detail that one has grown to expect of her work.

The German artist, William Forsythe, in his ‘Nowhere and everywhere at the same time’, is responsible for an intriguing installation where you are encouraged to create your own choreography as you make your path through a long room filled with suspended mobiles.

The Anglo-Indian artist, Bharti Kher, in her ‘Six Women’, presents life-size, plaster casts of six naked New Delhi sex workers, who confront the beholder with disarming honesty. And there is a wonderful mysterious silence in the work of the English artist, Emma McNally, and her study in fine graphite drawing.



Chiharu Shota. Image courtesy of Sydney Biennale.

The well-known Japanese-born, Berlin-based artist, Chiharu Shiota, has created one of the most evocative pieces of this biennale. It is a long room in the convict precinct converted into a surreal dormitory where an array of beds is enmeshed in a cobweb of black thread.

Meanwhile Xu Zhen, one of the giants in contemporary Chinese conceptual art, plays with the Parthenon frieze. He not only recreates, but repairs it, filling the missing bits with Chinese Buddhist deities to create a hybrid world of startling possibilities.

The most coherent of the displays is at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which has been designated as the Embassy of Spirits. You enter the space through Mella Jaarsma's continuous performance of the Dogwalk, a ritualistic re-enactment of people walking people as dogs with humorous, sexual and racial overtones.



Mella Jaarsmam, Dogwalk. Courtesy of the artist and Arndt Fine Art Photograph Mie Cornoedus.

There are three highlights at this venue. The first is Filipino artist, Rodel Tapaya and his sprawling seven metre painting 'Do you have a Rooster, Pedro?' with its mixture of symbolism and grisly realism.

The second is the Torres Strait Islander, Ken Thaiday Snr., with his distinctive masks and dance machines, while Nyapanyapa Yunupingu's haunting forest installation marks a refreshing departure from the artists who tediously repeat tried formulas in Yolngu art.

Her very personal treatment of textures, surfaces and markings effectively establishes its own enchanted space.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, in this context termed the Embassy of Translation, is the most disappointing of the major venues. Daniel Boyd's six new "dot paintings" are a highlight.

The performance of 'Victory over the Sun', which may have given birth to Malevich's Black Square, may be interesting for those who manage to catch it, and the video by the Berlin-based Shahryar Nashat 'Parade' are some of the slim pickings at this venue.

The Mortuary Station in Chippendale, appropriately named the Embassy of Transition, is of more interest as an architectural structure, than for the art inside it.



Charwei Tsai. Image courtesy of Sydney Biennale.

Charwei Tsai has inscribed the text of the Tibetan Bardo onto rounds of incense coils that are allowed to gradually burn down, while the spirit of the deceased prepares to leave this realm.

At the Embassy of Non-Participation, the Artspace at Woolloomooloo, two collaborating English artists, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, create two hard-hitting installations dealing with general questions of power, sexuality and privilege, as well as very specific themes, including the Mumbai massacre; Eton and the making of British prime ministers; sexual terrorism and the Arab Spring.

These are powerful, effective activist pieces that challenge the status quo as well as the role of art.

The vacuous space of the Carriageworks, termed the Embassy of Disappearance, is a major venue for the biennale with more than a score of individual artists and groups of artists participating. It is also a venue in which some of the bigger names in international art are juxtaposed with the work of Australian artists.



Jamie North Terraforms.  
Courtesy the artist and Sarah  
Cottier G.

Taiwanese Chen Chieh-jen presents a massive installation of photographic and video pieces marking the victims of industrialisation.

The Australian artist Jamie North constructs his monumental 'Terraforms', in which industrial waste combines with growing Australian native plants.

The 'Don't Follow the Wind' curatorial collective brings to us the "inaccessible" exhibition set up in Fukushima in a nuclear "no-go zone" and Lee Mingwei, once again, reconstructs 'Guernica in sand' – although frequently seen, it is an installation that never fails to impress (main image).

I have deliberately focused on the highlights, rather than lamenting the dross, trite, repetitive and juvenile pieces that we have grown to expect in biennale exhibitions of this nature.

The Sydney Biennale has long ceased to be a vanguard show designed to bring to the Australian provincial artistic backwater the latest artistic developments from abroad.

Sweeping thematic constructs that are deemed mandatory for events of this nature are rarely an armature around which to build an exhibition and are more like a smoke signal to indicate intent.

Despite some limitations, the 20th Biennale of Sydney has rescued the biennale from irrelevance and put it back on the agenda of serious art events in Australia.

Although it is an event in part designed to attract and amuse “the masses”, this time it is also likely to surprise people and make them think and question their assumptions about the nature of art.

*The Sydney Biennale runs from March 18 – June 5.*