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The Beauty of Distance: Global Art in the Context of the 17th Sydney Biennale

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"I am like a piece of land that itself is dry and barren, but if you scatter manure over it and cultivate it, it will bear good fruit. By this I mean that your Grace's conversation is the manure that has been cast upon the barren land of my dry wit."¹

Sancho Panza, *Don Quixote*

The 2010 Sydney Biennale, *The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*, unveiled what was dubbed one of the art world's largest and most ambitious undertakings to date, filling kilometers of Sydney Harbor real estate—both public and private—with 440 works from 166 local and international artists. Artistic director David Elliott said the biennale spoke to what he called the "condition of contemporary art today."² Yet above and beyond the works, it is the sheer magnitude of his egalitarian world vision that invigorates the show's potential.

This unprecedented display was geared at reorienting a global perspective on the biennale, projecting art into a new paradigm of internationalism, where the absurdity of notions such as East and West are sacrificed at the altar of a postmodern dynamism. Elliott posits that "this biennale will not 'tell' you anything";³ rather, it downplays the topic of the "other" as less worthy of attention than the nature of the actual distance between peoples.⁴ In this case, *The Beauty of Distance* was a success, not so much for artists who are on the periphery in the broadest sense of the term, many who still remain nameless to an international audience yet might be well known at home, but, rather, as an abstract statement about the industry's grasp of global art awareness. Yet while the Sydney Biennale makes a bold statement, its intentions do not parallel the curatorial effect of the endeavour. Instead of directly addressing artists on the periphery, Elliott's curatorial strategy stressed broad international coverage of various demographics.

With the immense reciprocal pressures of financial obligations and relationships that power such international events, this contradiction was inevitable from the start; in spite of this, Elliott has shown the necessary determination to pursue his vision. Regardless of his intentions, Elliott's role is that of an *auteur*, and his contribution should hence be taken in the context of a larger discourse on the state of "global art" as a gradual departure from an Occident-centred paradigm. On the other hand, Elliott's show not only distanced itself from this larger discourse, for the most part it neglected to represent peripheral art.

sake of simplicity and accessibility, but also for convenience, as it is this context that undermines his championing the underdog by saluting former peripheral-turned-mainstream artists. In this sense, little scrutiny was given by the audience to which artworks he selected, and although he was criticized as being nepotistic because of his longstanding relationship with many of the artists in the biennale, his message as an *auteur* unfortunately received the least direct attention from its critics.

"The Enlightenment is Over!"⁵

The resonance of this proclamation by David Elliott was to summarize the drive of the biennale, taking aim at the grand unifying theories harking back to the Enlightenment that have prevailed in Western civilization over the past centuries. Here they are emphatically rejected, along with today's flailing discourse of the modernist ideal, undermined by the antithesis embodied in globalism. In turn, we make introductions between the prevailing dimension of contemporary art and its alter-ego of "global art."⁶



Top: Shen Shaomin, *Summit*, 2010, silica gel simulation, acrylic, fabric, installation view at Sydney Biennale. Photo: Sebastian Kriete. Courtesy of the artist. Presentation made possible with support of Osage Art Foundation, Hong Kong.

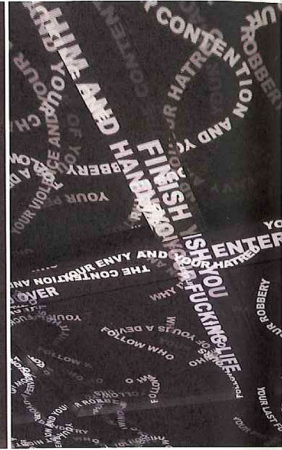
Right: Shen Shaomin, *Summit* (detail), 2010, silica gel simulation, acrylic, fabric, installation view at Sydney Biennale. Photo: Sebastian Kriete. Courtesy of the artist.



Setting the scene, we find ourselves in the popular arena of this eclectic global awakening. Here is where *The Beauty of Distance* narrates the story of contemporary art's reconciliation with an estranged and obscure relative, known by some as "global art." In the search for

striving to relieve the world of chaos, bringing to fruition a harmonious and uninterrupted soliloquy of their rationally justified world order.

The demise of this unifying world theory is a regular subject of both departure and arrival for these biennale artists. Heilongjiang artist Shen Shaomin's installation work *Summit* (2010) plays out a brooding satire where deceased communist leaders stage a final meeting of minds. Shen recreates models in the likeness of Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Kim Il-Sung, Ho Chi Minh, and an ailing Fidel Castro who is hooked up to a respirator, hanging on to his final animated breaths.



Dispensing with any funerary rites, we have eventually recognized contemporary art as synonymous with global art,⁷ yet as simple as this assertion may appear, we have yet to agree definitively on what either of these two so-called “terms-in-progress” mean. Therefore, in asking the question of one, we are inevitably drawn to inquire into the nature of the other. Our notions of global art—those one reads about in books, not to mention contemporary art journals—finds its rationality displaced by the chaotic flux inherent in the layers of discourse global art demands. Indeed, rather than attempting to categorically nail down either of these points, the 17th Biennale of Sydney blurs the lines further by means of gross elaboration, teasing, and jerking at the loose threads of our sensibilities.

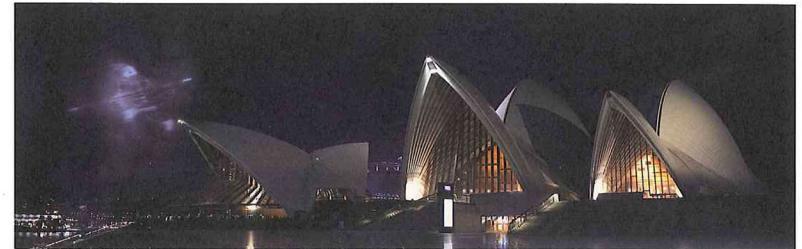
Hong Kong-based artist Tsang Kin-Wah's text-based animated light mural *The First Seal—It Would Be Better If You Have Never Been Born...* (2009) literally projects this intertextuality. We watch it flow between the layers of ascribed symbols and morality, where simple phrases such as “The Dark,” “The Kiss,” “The Sin,” progress into complicated and emotionally charged expletives, such as “The violence and the banditry” and “Your last fucking night.”

The Sydney Biennale strives to invoke a feeling of pervasive worldliness.

Left: Kin-Wah Tsang, *The First Seal—It Would Be Better If You Have Never Been Born...* (2009), digital video projection, sound, 6 mins., 41 secs. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Sebastian Kriete. Presentation made possible with the support of the Annie Wong Foundation.

Right: Kin-Wah Tsang, *The First Seal—It Would Be Better If You Have Never Been Born...* (detail), 2009, digital video projection, 6 mins., 41 secs. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Sebastian Kriete. Presentation made possible with the support of the Annie Wong Foundation.

the upper echelons of the Chinese art world and reside mainly in the U.S. This is anything but the periphery Elliott seeks to address. Yet it is in this spirit of accommodating diversity that Elliott attempts to stretch his roster of artists across widespread demographics—spanning geography, age, ethnicity, gender, and residence abroad and at home, as well as artistic media.



Jennifer Wen Ma, *New Adventures of Havoc in Heaven III*, 2010, smoke, projector, and animation, installation view at the Sydney Opera House. Photo: Michael Corridore. Courtesy of the artist.

This point of peripheral art, which opposes its corresponding epicentres, is made sorely obvious in the face of the logistical magnitude of curating such a biennale. It is not only among its Chinese contingency that Elliott's vision is fulfilled by the most established artists from within the region. In this respect, geographical distance provides the illusion of equal representation. Like most biennale curators, he includes old friends and favourites, and the final selection reflects the weight of managerial pressure to ascribe to both the accessible and sensational. This ultimately detracts from the chaotic, multifarious nature of the biennale's initial message.

Ideals and Realities as Rungs of a Ladder

In theory, the liberation of a multivariate discourse was realized through the shift away from modernism.⁸ Yet practical evidence of such a paradigm shift falls short of all the rhetoric. Until now, prototypes of a more globally accommodating consciousness have largely been state fostered. Many Western democracies have been led through the gradual progression of such perceived frameworks as the “ethnic arts” and “cultural diversity,” on to more sociopolitically robust applications like “multiculturalism,” which matured in the Post-Cold War buzz of the 1990s.⁹

Guangzhou's young sensation Cao Fei contributed the work *Untitled (People's Limbo)* (2009), which is part of the larger online project *RMB City*, constructed in Second Life by the artist's own Wharhol-like “factory.” In a less unilateral meeting of minds than Shen Shaomin's *Summit*, Cao's new media work juxtaposes thinkers and leaders from vastly divergent backgrounds, each of whom have influenced the China of today: Karl Marx, Mao Zedong, Laozi, and the Lehman Brothers argue over money, power, and ideology.

A great deal of emphasis is laid on this connection between our notion of contemporary art and pluralism, and global art still hasn't been appropriated on the dynamic terms that such a revelation of equality



the “aesthetic agenda of contemporary art,”¹⁰ continue to undermine the process of coming to terms with the sheer complexity facing global art.

Indeed, many ask why there has been so little practical headway in pursuing a more global awareness of the affairs and interests of the Other in comparison to the technological leaps and bounds of the past decades. Edward Said disturbs the assumption that globalization and advances in technology among the global media imply “progress” in inter-cultural relations, and suggests the opposite—that they in fact reinforce fundamental cultural stereotypes.¹¹ This leads to the question of whether or not globalization is in fact the postcolonization of the remaining corners of the world by the West. By directing the biennial the way he has, Elliott offers to loosely and open-endedly address this both as a potentiality and as a reality.

Cartography of a Precarious Age

Like the discrepancy between ideals and reality, the Sydney Biennale reflects many of our misconceptions about what we call “globalization,” which could be more realistically conveyed as a web of epicentres. Thus we are introduced to the proposed framework of a global art system.

Addressing the peripheral “other” has been the original aim of many past large art events, most particularly documenta, initiated when Germany lay dismembered in the wake of the Second World War. documenta was one of the first substantive champions of an antithesis to a rigid hierarchy determined by pedigree. Even more akin to Sydney, we see in 1989 the advent of curator Jean-Hubert Martin’s *Magiciens de la Terre*, which, despite the controversy aroused by juxtaposing contemporary and “ethnic arts,” was received as a groundbreaking rebuttal of dominant ethnocentric practices. Though Elliott prefers we see his show as standing alone as an epic statement, the pedigree of “global art,” biennials, and international events clearly has its precedents.

Cao Fei, *Untitled (People's Limbo)*, 2009, single-channel video, 20 mins. Courtesy of RMB City © 2009. RMB City Project is developed by Cao Fei (SL: China Tracy) and Vitamin Creative Space. Facilitator: Uli Sigg (SL: UliSigg Cisse).

first biennials (such as Venice, beginning in 1895) grew indirectly from the world’s fairs, or universal exhibitions, of the nineteenth century:

In [world’s fairs], the ideology of modernity, manifested through displays of design and manufacture, went hand in hand with imperialist ambitions and racist assumptions; the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1889, for example, was notable not only for the building of the Eiffel Tower, but also for its displays of African and other “primitive” dwellings complete with living residents.¹²

These traces are visible in the use of national spaces and ambassadorial artists at biennials. Later expositions such as documenta stood out in binary opposition as embracing a more “humanist ideal.” Yet despite this history of rebellion, global art scholars remind us that global art now inevitably remains the domain of commercial galleries and dealers.

Thus it is not through the open defiance of the art market that artists and curators succeed through subversion of the system; rather, they do so by leading discourse, visible in the emergence of a new class of globally oriented curators like David Elliott, who Paul O’Neill describes as the “jet-set *flaneurs*” of the art world.¹³ Now, unlike in the age of the museums, these curators are increasingly seen as leaders of discourse, providing the narratives that influence the direction of global art, in much the same way as film directors began to fulfill the role of auteur.

The Tyranny of Beauty

Cockatoo Island encapsulates the heart of the Sydney Biennale as its chief monument and a testament to the distance between it and the world’s fairs a hundred years earlier. Nominated for World Heritage listing, the largest island in Sydney Harbour has served as a convict prison and shipyard and maintains traces of its past, having become a significant feature since first being used for the previous Sydney Biennale of 2008. Yet where the previous curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev overpowered her public in 2006 within the cavernous space of the island’s post-industrial-colonial complexes, Elliott felt determined to realize the potential inherent within the emptiness and chart the chaotic blueprints within the beauty of distance.

This pressure to fill space as though fulfilling potential is a symbolic gesture that runs parallel to the Biennale’s intentions. Its unofficial centerpiece was undoubtedly Cai Guoqiang’s *Inopportune* (2008), a set of six cars suspended from the ceiling of the enormous shipyard warehouse in a motionless panoramic sequence that rehearses the car’s explosion, spinning through the air, and safe landing on its wheels again.

Elliott’s choice of the globally acclaimed work, *Inopportune*, is argued by Katherine Grube to hint at the recognition of contemporary Chinese art within the community of international exhibitions.¹⁴ As a key

vessels. Other works on the island clutter the warehouses in similar fashion, each work demanding its own space in a quest for recognition.



Cai Guo-Qiang, *Inopportune: Stage One*, 2004, installation at Cockatoo Island, Sydney. Photo: Ben Symons. Collection of Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Robert M. Arnold in honour of the 75th Anniversary of the Seattle Art Museum, 2006. Presentation in Sydney made possible with the support of Shiseido.



The use of clutter is also evident in Gonkar Gyasto's *Wheel of Modern Life* (2008), which incorporates traditional Tibetan iconography, corporate logos, cartoon characters, and Buddhist motifs with all the poetic tragedy inherent in the symbolism of the Buddhist Wheel of Life. Likewise, Elliott's statement takes on new meaning in the selection of

Jiangxi artist Liu Jianhua's *Container Series* (2009) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, made up of a range of white monochrome porcelain vessels arranged on the ground, the blood-red interior glaze tainting the contents of each urn and dish, which are filled to the brim with liquid. We see this again, as not simply a filling up of space, but manifesting a certain revisionism, a clutter

Gonkar Gyasto, *Wheel of Modern Life*, 2010, pencil, India ink, collage and stickers on paper, 154 x 154 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi, London.



Liu Jianhua, *Container Series*, 2009, porcelain and glaze, installation view at Art Gallery of New South Wales. Photo: Carley Wright. Courtesy of the artist and Beijing Commune, Beijing. Presentation made possible by Beijing Commune, Beijing.

In the end, compromise has undermined Elliott's original claim that the Sydney Biennale exhibited art that was previously marginalized or discounted by modernity. Instead, we see only a clear reflection of the underlying framework we use to understand the phenomenon of globalization. On the other hand, Elliott's vision cannot be judged as a success or failure, as it holds fast to no fundamental criterion other than that of contributing to the global discourse surrounding the future paradigm of global contemporary art.

Notes

- Miguel de Saavedra Cervantes, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha*, trans. S. Putnam, vol. 2, part 2, chapter 12 (New York: Viking, 1949), 580.
- Interview of David Elliott by Vernissage TV, Istanbul, September 9, 2009, available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yianrxHfQI&feature=ivst> (last accessed September 9, 2010).
- Quoted from David Elliott's speech on the advent of the opening ceremony of the Biennale of Sydney, 2010, May 10.
- Conversation between the author and David Elliott during the opening ceremony of the Biennale of Sydney, 2010, May 10.
- Quoted from David Elliott's speech on the advent of the opening ceremony of the Biennale of Sydney, 2010, May 10.
- For comprehensive inquiry into modernism and the rise of "global art," see Hans Belting, *Art History After Modernism*, trans. Caroline Salzwedel and Mitch Cohen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2003).
- Jean Fisher, ed., *Global Visions: Toward a New Internationalism in The Visual Arts* (London: Kala Press, 1994).
- David Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).
- For further discussion of the institutionalization of globalization and its associated discontents, see Hou Hanru, "Entropy—Chinese Artists, Western Institutions: A New Internationalism," in *Global Visions*, 79–88.
- Interview of David Elliott by Vernissage TV, Istanbul, September 9, 2009.
- Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- Sandy Nairne, "Case Study 4: Exhibitions of Contemporary Art," in Emma Barker, ed., *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 105–26.
- Paul O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse," in Judith Rugg, ed., *Issues in*