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BIENNIAL

SO FAR AWAY, AND YET SO NEAR

Curator David Elliott's roundup in Sydney investigated what separates—and what unites—cultures around the globe.

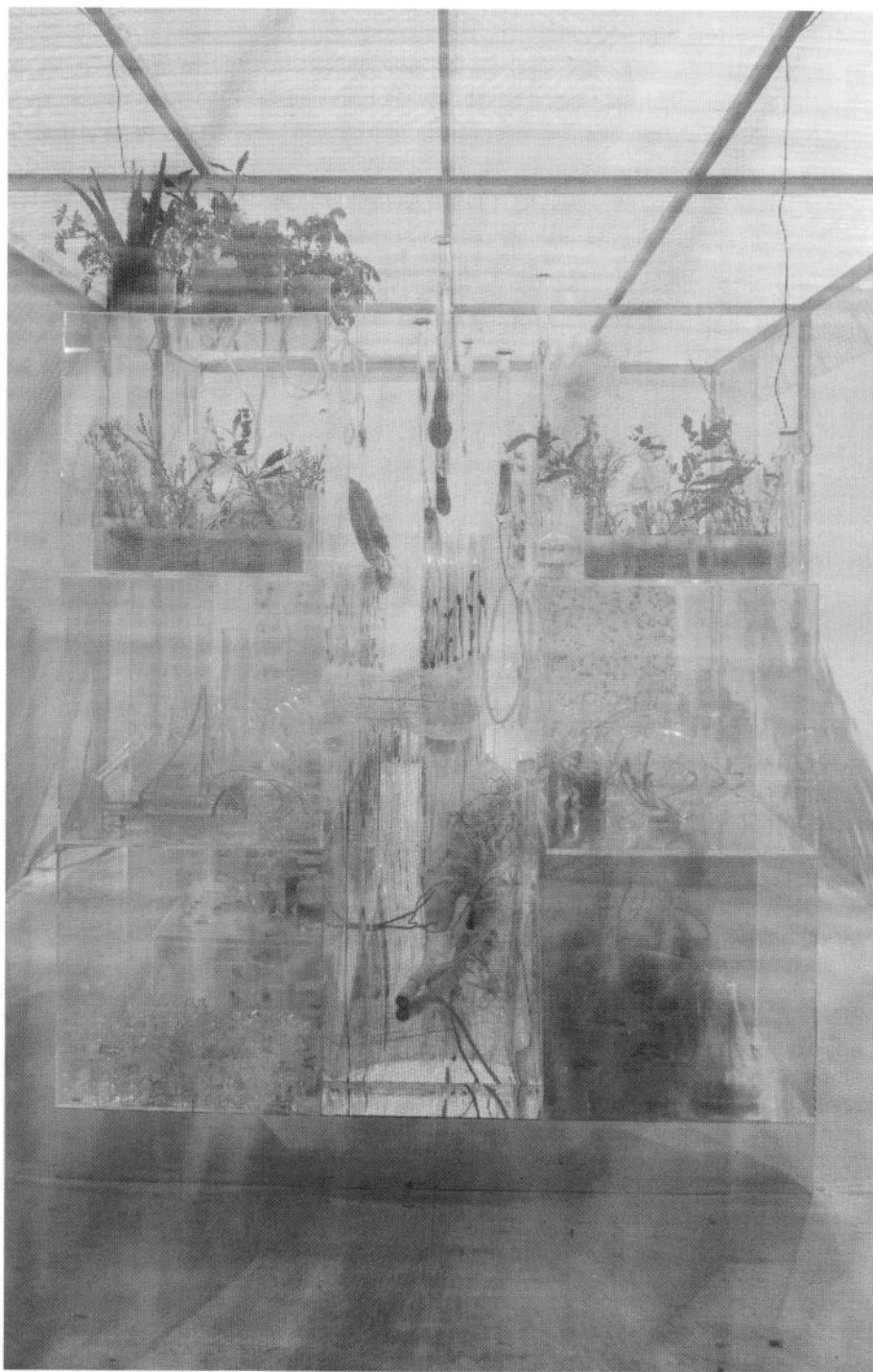
BY FELICITY FENNER

THE BIENNALE OF SYDNEY, which just completed its 17th edition, was founded in 1973 for the purpose of bringing current international art to geographically isolated Australian audiences. Despite more frequent and affordable air travel, Australia remains a continent beset by the challenges of distance, the dominant theme of British-born curator David Elliott's 2010 version of the roundup, "The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age."

While distance is a persistent factor in the Australian psyche, especially at Biennale time, when Australian art is thrust onto the world stage, a related problem for the international art world is a lack of chronological and mental distance between art events, which prompts inevitable repetition—of artists, themes and critical formulas—among the many biennials now propagating around the globe. Elliott's title alluding to resilience in the face of difficult times is reminiscent of Hou Hanru's for the 2007 Istanbul Biennale, "Not Only Possible But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War," although the Sydney tagline is at once more ambiguous and, indeed, optimistic. Distance, beautiful or otherwise, was clearly not an obstacle when it came to gathering exhibition material, with 440 works by 125 artists and artist groups from 36 countries ensuring a degree of overlap with other bien-

View of Janet Laurence's
*WAITING—A Medicinal
Garden for Ailing Plants*,
2010, glass, acrylic, mesh,
plants, blown glass
and mixed mediums; at
the Royal Botanic Gardens.
Photo Sebastian Kriete.

All installation photos at the
17th Biennale of Sydney.



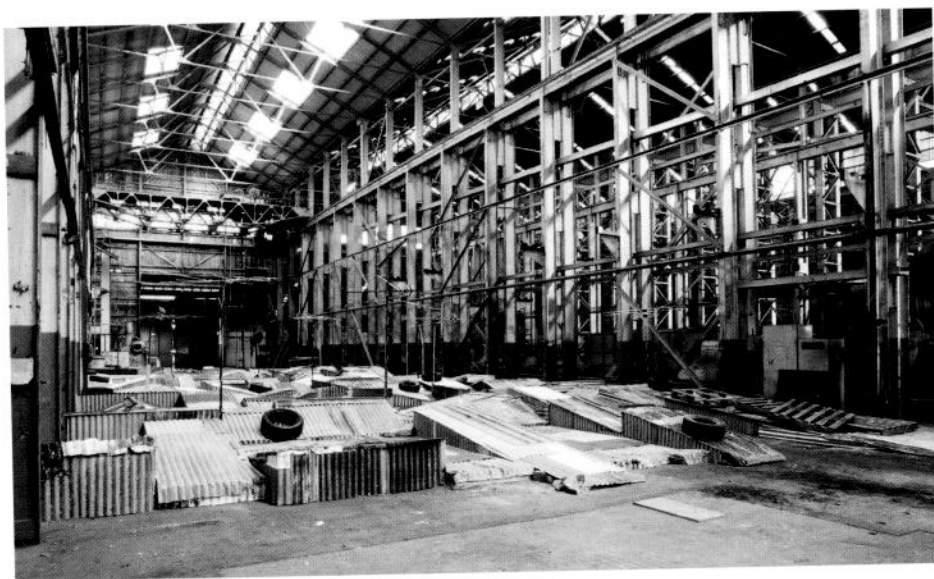
nials. While some key works—like those by Cai Guo-Qiang and Steve McQueen—were not new to travelled art viewers, there was a decent proportion of commissioned, site-specific work, especially on Cockatoo Island, the exhibition's largest venue.

Since leaving a 20-year directorship of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1996, Elliott has lived and worked in Stockholm, Tokyo, Istanbul and Berlin, presenting exhibitions that have displayed Western artworks alongside examples from various indigenous cultures, and from Asia and Eastern Europe. This was again the case in

newly commissioned installations on Cockatoo Island. This site, the largest island in Sydney Harbour and one of the Biennale's two primary venues, provided raw and historically resonant spaces for artists to create truly site-specific works that responded to the heritage-listed environs. The island has a rich history as a 19th-century prison enclave, a reform school and until recently the site of Australia's largest shipbuilding yard. It was superbly utilized as an art venue for the first time by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, curator of the 2008 Biennale, with many installations specially conceived for the storied environment.

addressed both the significance of an Aboriginal, of its site on Cockatoo Island (an ancient home to indigenous tribes) and the racial oppression that continues in Australia to this day. A full-size inflatable jumping castle (known in the U.S. as a "bounce castle" or "moonwalk") decorated with black-and-white designs derived from the artist's Wiradjuri heritage. The piece was conceived for the Biennale as an interactive, party-theme work with million-dollar views of Sydney Harbour. On deciding to climb onto the castle to jump, unwittingly contributed to a symbolic desecration of native culture, illustrating how easily personal gratification can override cultural understanding.

Similar issues of racial exploitation were addressed in Kader Attia's *Kasbah* (2010), another seemingly interactive work that induced visitors to "walk all over" non-Western objects. The hodgepodge of shantytown debris laid out on the floor of the cavernous Turbine Hall, was not conceived as a site-specific installation, yet well within the rustic beauty of the island. The French artist sourced



Left, Kader Attia: *Kasbah*, 2010, wood, corrugated iron, TV, antennas, satellite dishes, found materials. Photo Ben Symons.

Sydney, but well over 50 percent of participating artists came from Europe and North America, and around 20 percent from Australia, leaving just a quarter of the slots to artists from the rest of the world—with the vast majority of that group hailing from China and Japan. While it might be justifiable to overlook work from smaller nations in the pursuit of a coherent presentation, it was a disappointing curatorial decision that saw some of the larger regions with a strong sense of cultural identity, such as the Indian subcontinent and every South American country, ignored in favor of the world's traditional art centers.

THE 2010 BIENNALE was spread over six venues around the city, with a large portion of film, painting and sculpture at the Museum of Contemporary Art and an assortment of preexisting work and

This year, although it was impossible to recapture the novelty value of the site, the standout pieces were once again those that best exploited the ramshackle charm of this unusual place. In addition, works were conceived for the Royal Botanic Gardens and Sydney Opera House, both well-known harbor-front destinations in the area of the first colonial settlements.

As all biennial themes are, the notion of distance was interpreted very broadly to encompass a full range of disjunction, from geographic and physical separation to gaps between black and white cultures, rich and poor societies, art and life. The distance between such polarities was most successfully explored in works reliant on audience participation. Aboriginal Australian artist Brook Andrew's *Jumping Castle War Memorial* (2010) cleverly

Top right, Brook Andrew: *Jumping Castle War Memorial*, 2010, vinyl, approx. 23 feet wide. Photo Ben Symons.

Right, view of Hiroshi Sugimoto's mixed-medium installation *Faraday Cage*, 2010. Photo Sebastian Kriete.

All works this spread on Cockatoo Island.



INTERACTIVE WORKS
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the old corrugated iron roofing from temporary dwellings in different parts of the world. Visitors were invited to walk across the low-lying roofscape made from squeaky sheets of tin in various states of decay. In contrast to more conceptual precedents, such as Carl Andre's floor pieces and Hans Haacke's smashed marble floor in the 1993 Venice Biennale, this walk-on work offered a palpable experience of place. In keeping with the exhibition's theme, the installation evoked the precarious and impoverished living conditions of Third World countries.

Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang creates artworks that, while manifesting beauty and spectacle, have their thematic basis in acts of violence. *Inopportune: Stage One* (2004), shown and reproduced many times before its appearance in Sydney, alludes in an eerily beautified fashion to terrorist car bombings. Cai suspended the series of nine cars pierced by sequenced light tubes from the ceiling of the Turbine Hall. It was the second work encountered by visitors on the island after Andrew's jumping castle, and the installations were linked

by a playful visual esthetic that subtly engaged the viewer in dark, underlying issues of political conflict.

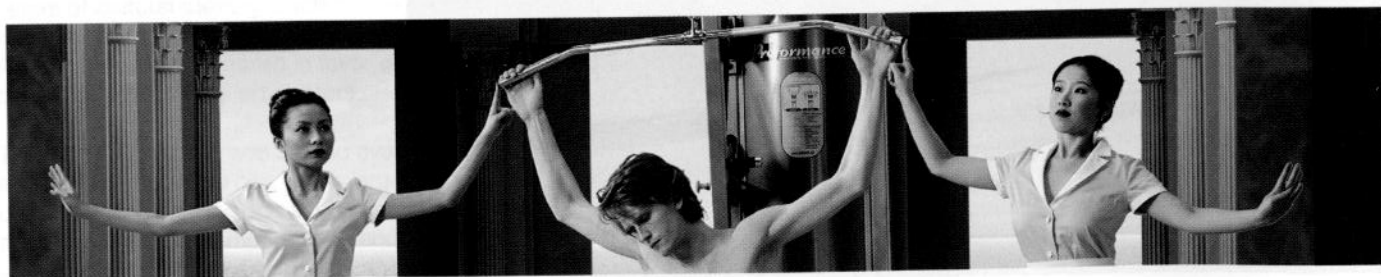
Light-as-spectacle also drew viewers to Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Faraday Cage* (2010). Conceived for the enormous Power House on Cockatoo Island, vertical lightbox images of forked lightning were installed in an ascending arrangement on either side of a central stairway. Enhanced by a soundtrack of static electricity and thunder, the work created an otherworldly ambience that matched the surreal surrounds of the vast derelict interior.

Two of the most thoughtful site-specific installations in the Biennale were afforded distinct spaces within Sydney proper. On a sheltered lawn in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Australian artist Janet Laurence created a "hospital" for threatened and fragile plants, its miragelike white mesh form reminiscent of both a traditional hothouse and a military field hospital. Inside *WAITING—A Medicinal Garden for Ailing Plants* (2010), visitors could examine native plants in various

THE BREATHTAKING BEAUTY OF THE CINEMATOGRAPHY IN INSTALLATIONS BY AES+F, YANG FUDONG, CHRISTIAN JANKOWSKI, CAO FEI AND OTHERS HELPED TO EXPLAIN THE CURRENT PREEMINENCE OF VIDEO AND FILM.

states of decay and recovery, being nursed back to health with the aid of a complex system of glass beakers, bandaging and plastic tubing.

While Laurence's installation was imbued with tenderness and hope, American Paul McCarthy's oozed disgust and despair. *Ship of Fools, Ship Adrift 2* (2010) commanded the historic Pier 2/3, Sydney's only original wharf to have escaped modern development. McCarthy's monstrous foam sculpture evoked the misery and desire of convicts and colonizers who made the





Above, Christian Jankowski: *Tableaux Vivant TV—LIVE from the inside*, 2010, video, approx. 30 minutes; at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo Jenni Carter.

Left, AES+F: *The Feast of Trimalchio*, 2009, three stills from a nine-channel video installation, 19 minutes.

long voyage to Australia, some arriving at this very wharf. The life-size sailing ship filled with fleshy foam, some of it configured as humanlike occupants, had a particular resonance in Australia this summer, as political controversy raged over the increasing number of boats arriving with asylum seekers from Asia and the Middle East. In McCarthy's contribution to the long heritage of the Ship of Fools allegory, bloated sails appear to betoken gluttonous appetites, indicated by what looks like blood spilled around the ship's edge.

ALONG WITH WORKS that meaningfully responded to their setting, the most compelling entries in the Biennale were video installations, specifically those by AES+F (Russia),

Ming Wong (Singapore) and Isaac Julien (UK) [see Julien article this issue]. Some were made especially for the Biennale, such as the performance by the Finnish group Mieskuoro Huutajat (Shouting Men's Choir), which belted out the Australian national anthem followed by the words of then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology speech to indigenous Australians for past maltreatment.

Though not all conceived specifically for Sydney, each of these recent video works also explores aspects of place, some quite real and others fictional. Outstanding among them was the nine-channel film *The Feast of Trimalchio* (2009) by the collective AES+F, an entry featured at the Venice Biennale last year. Titled after a chapter in Petronius's *Satyricon*, which mocks the decadence and pretensions of the Roman empire, the work is arguably the Biennale's pièce de résistance. Housed in a purpose-built circular cinema cocooned from the industrial detritus of Cockatoo Island, the cinematic display of hedonistic glamour and indulgence

has no dialogue yet speaks a universal visual language. Backed by rousing classical music, the film uses the visual lexicon of advertising—beautiful people eyeing each other in a swank world we wish we could inhabit—to take a well-manicured swipe at victims of status anxiety.

Equally compelling, though set at the opposite, despairing extreme of human existence, was Chinese filmmaker Yang Fudong's engrossing six-channel documentary *East of Que Village* (2007). The destitution of rural Chinese life is revealed in black and white through a visually spare, almost silent narrative that focuses on scavenging dogs in a bleak agricultural village beset by extreme weather, isolation and abject poverty. The breathtaking beauty of the cinematography in each of these works—one pictorially opulent and the other austere—helped to explain the current preeminence of film and video art reflected in this exhibition.

There were many other video installations by artists well known on the biennial circuit, such as Yayoi Kusama

(Japan), Bill Viola (U.S.) and Mark Wallinger (UK), but only a handful, including Chinese artist Cao Fei's engaging digital animation *People's Limbo* (2009), from her ongoing "RMB City" project, were relatively new to international viewers. Another was a short film by one of the several German-born artists in the exhibition, Christian Janowski, whose *Tableaux Vivant TV—LIVE from the inside* (2010) is the only video shot locally, featuring art world personalities, journalists and a celebrity chef, all from Australia. The work offers a healthy



Above, Shen Shaomin: *Bonsai*, 2007-09, plants, iron tools and mixed mediums; at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo Jenni Carter.

Left, view of Penny Siopsis's mixed-medium paintings *Three Trees* (left), 2009, and *Ambush* (right), 2008; at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Photo Jenni Carter.



dose of self-deprecating humor, parodying artists and biennials through the lens of "infotainment."

While video dominated the Biennale in terms of quality, there were notable painting and sculptural inclusions, most housed at the Museum of Contemporary Art. South African painter Penny Siopsis was represented by a pair of large paintings made with oil and mixed mediums to create waxy, visceral surfaces in a palette of bloody reds. The works depict women as victims of oppressive forces, vulnerable, exposed and frightened. *Ambush*, 2008, is a reference to Hokusai's 1820 dream of a samurai's wife ravaged by a samurai. British artists showed a woman in a white dress (2009), a cardboard box from their collection since the 1990s.

Eloquently illustrating Elliott's themes of beauty, distance and survival was Chinese artist Shen Shaomin's *Bonsai* (2007-09), a collection of contorted bonsai plants. Among the most unexpected and unusual works in the Biennale, the live plants struggled to flourish in steel armatures designed to stunt and direct growth. The instruction manuals and pruning tools used in the art of bonsai were included in the display, in an allusion to society's controlling and destructive attitude to the natural world. The work offered a sharp, inadvertent contrast to Laurence's plant hospital.

Finally, the indisputably powerful sculptures of Louise Bourgeois (U.S.), which encapsulate the exhibition's subtitle, "Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age," gained even greater importance upon news of the artist's death two weeks into the exhibition. "ECHO" (2007), a suite of seven bronze sculptures cast

from Bourgeois's discarded clothes, seemed transformed by her death into a collection of intimate shrouds commemorating one of the most widely admired artists of our time.

Bourgeois's was not the only spirit to haunt the 2010 Biennale of Sydney. The exhibition was dedicated by Elliott to the memory of the late Nick Waterlow, artistic director of the Biennale in 1979, 1986 and 1988, and chair of the international selection committee in 2000. Waterlow's abiding curatorial legacy to Australia is the re-imagining of the country's art in the context of international cultures. As a British immigrant, he utilized the perspective of distance to reveal global parallels in a great variety of art of the 20th century. While Elliott's positioning of Sydney as "distant" was controversial—at face value, an outdated Eurocentric viewpoint that failed to recognize Australia's prominence within the Asia Pacific region—the 2010 exhibition successfully illustrated Waterlow's conviction that an art audience's experience is affected by the curator's direct engagement not only with the art of the times but with the reality of other cultures, past and present. ○

The 17th Biennale of Sydney, "The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age," took place May 12-Aug. 1.

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