

## **History Herstory -Vivienne Binns, Ian Milliss**

The Sydney Biennale has been held every three years since 1973, an anomaly which gives a few clues to the entire nature of the event. Its reality has never matched its pretensions, to such a degree that even the name misses the mark, forcing its organizers to now describe it as a “biennale-type” exhibition . . .

The first Sydney Biennale was held at the Sydney Opera House in 1973, and was organised by the Commander Tony Winterbotham, assistant to Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, managing director of Transfield. It was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Visual Arts Board, and Transfield. Transfield’s involvement in the exhibition, as both initiator and only private source of funds was a continuation of an earlier involvement in art. The Transfield Prize had become one of the most important art prizes at the time of its discontinuation in the early 1970s. It was rumoured that Franco Belgiorno-Nettis was not happy at the radical nature of the “post-object” works which were awarded the prize in the last few years, and so the money was instead to be put into what he saw as a more prestigious international exhibition, a “Biennale” of art produced around the “Pacific Rim”.

This first Biennale was not a great success, however, either publicly or artistically, and so the projected Second Biennale lacked direction until a group from the Sculpture Centre approached Leon Paroissien, Director of the Visual Arts Board. They proposed "a major sculpture fest" to celebrate the Society of Sculptors' 25th anniversary. Paroissien realised that a major sculpture exhibition would be a good idea for the Biennale, and so Tom McCullough, organiser of the highly successful Mildura Sculpture Triennial, was asked to become Director. The Pacific Rim concept was expanded to include New York and Europe, and several meetings were held with artists to advise on selection. John Stringer was appointed to select in the US, Tommaso Trini in Europe. This entire package was then presented to the Art Gallery of NSW, the Gallery accepted it, which was not surprising, given that the then director, Peter Laverty, was on the Biennale Committee.

Through no merit of its own, the Second Biennale immediately hit the headlines.

The opening of the Biennale by Malcolm Fraser was exactly one year and one day after the dismissal of the Labour Government. Newspapers reported a conservative estimate of 300 demonstrators outside the gallery, with a walkout during Fraser's opening speech by over 100 people, including 12 Australian artists represented in the exhibition.

A pamphlet circulated at the opening listed various repressive measures by the Fraser government in media and cultural affairs: cutbacks in the ABC, the appointment of a conservative chairman, (Sir William Bland), conservative commissioners, (Laurie Short and Leonie Kramer) to the ABC, abolition of the Film and Television Board of the Australia Council, cessation of the Australian Assistance Plan which funded community services and cultural programs especially those of ethnic and minority groups, and the appointment of a conservative chairman (Elwyn Lynn) to the Visual Arts Board. It concluded:

*"While presently reserving the right for the ruling class (and its culture producers) to be subsidised in its entertainments, Fraser has withdrawn the right from all Australians to have access to information and venues for cultural participation which are independent of the commercial interests of the media oligopoly (sic) and the political interests of his government".*

Possibly because of the atmosphere of controversy generated by this demonstration, discussions began on the nature of the next Biennale and the possibility of general artworld representation in its organisation. Towards the end of the Biennale, a symposium was held at the Sculpture Centre to discuss possibilities for the Third Biennale. The panel consisted of Tom McCullough, Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, and Tommaso Trini, who had been brought out to Australia by the V.A.B. Statements were also made by various members of the audience, all generally directed towards a fairly conventional concept of art and of exhibitions. Daniel Thomas, for example, suggested that the Third Biennale be made up of performance works and videos by a carefully selected small number of artists.

Several months later, early in 1977, the Sculpture Centre, the Contemporary Art Society (NSW) and the Institute of Contemporary Art, jointly published a newspaper titled "Manifestos, Statements, and Other Follies" a title which suggests the ambivalent attitude many artists have to any attempt at articulating attitudes in the art world. The original letter soliciting contributions stated *"We are asking few people to write in 'manifesto' fashion - expressing their 'world views' and the kind of increase in consciousness that artists are (hopefully) moving towards."* Several of the contributions contained speculative ideas for the Biennale, a common thread running through them being the idea of a "Global Network" linking Australian artists and activity centres with artists and activity centres overseas, under the heading "Quo Vadis Biennale".

In this publication, Betty Kelly and Ken Unsworth announced a forum on the Third Biennale to be held at the Sculpture Centre *"for the consideration of ideas that have been generated by many people in random and unconnected discussions during the month in which this 'document for the future' has been in preparation. The feeling is strong that the possibility exists to create an exhibition prototype that will not only be of value in the context of Australian art, but will be significant in heralding possibilities for the art world at large."* "The unavoidable nitty gritty of organisation had finally begun.

The forum was held on 4th of May, 1977, and was attended by a rather diverse group of artists, as have all subsequent meetings. Several had prepared proposals, and ideas ranged from the by now familiar and unoriginal "in depth survey of a limited number of artists" to a survey of community arts. The "in depth survey" was being pushed by what became jokingly known as the "quality control group" most loudly represented by John Lethbridge and Richard Dunn. They used the "quality control" argument at length when it was suggested (by a man) that the meeting should demand 50% representation of women artists.

The "quality control" argument as applied to women is that proportionately few women artists are exhibited because women don't or can't produce quality art. One variation suggests that the reason for this is that they can produce babies instead. In

the heated debate over 50% representation, one man loudly and drunkenly declared that women "are all just a pack of silly cunts", which seemed to sum up one widespread male attitude. Several women also objected to 50% representation on the grounds that it was patronising and therefore sexist. Discussion on the subject was suspended for the time being, and it was decided that a series of meetings should be held in different venues, and negotiations begun with the Biennale Committee, which at that stage consisted of Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, Elwyn Lynn, Leon Paroissien, Peter Laverty, and Tony Winterbotham.

The next meeting was held at Watters Gallery on 19th May. It was attended by most of those present at the first meeting and for the first time, a strong and organised feminist group. Heated and often turgid and irrelevant argument immediately began on the 50% representation issue. The "quality control" heavies were notably absent, having had such difficulty in articulating their position in any rational way at the previous meeting. But there were others, less heavy but equally insistent. The various levels of consciousness amongst men on this issue ranged from the very naively sexist to the sickeningly over-sympathetic, but they faced women who were well experienced in combating sexist and other responses on the issue. The tendency of artists to push their own individualistic world views at the expense of everyone else's patience was also well displayed, but in the course of the evening most of the ideas which were to form the basis of future negotiations were aired. The key issue was the choice of director, and the nature of the director's job, followed by the possibilities of more democratic organisation, and the content of the exhibition. In general, those at the meeting wanted greater community involvement through more accessible venues than the Art Gallery of N.S.W., and less elitist concepts of "art" on the part of the organisers.

A subcommittee of the meeting was formed to meet with Leon Paroissien to discuss ideas and get more information. It consisted of Vivienne Binns, Betty Kelly, Ian Milliss, Annie Minchin, and Terry Reid, but it was decided that all such sub-committees would have only temporary status and rotating membership, to allow maximum possible participation from all involved.

The next meeting, on 16th June, 1977 at the Carslaw Building Sydney Uni, was advertised with Annie Minchin's "idea goody bags, handwritten by the Quality Art Bag Co., Bad Taste Division". Annie Minchin was prominent not only because of her organisational skills, but also because she constantly advocated a more light hearted approach to the whole affair, including the introduction of performances, slide shows, etc. to meetings. Statements were read from the Kinetic Energy dance group, and one from the Womens Art Group which suggested that research committees be set up to investigate current activities in the arts in Australia, especially the work of women. They would aim to open up a wider spectrum of arts and media, and to influence strongly the eventual form of the Biennale. It was also suggested that a separate forum be held on women and sexism in the arts, to thrash the issue out once and for all. By this meeting, interest had broadened out to the point where the interests represented ranged through performance arts, community arts, photography, women's art, multi-media artists, art students, painters, sculptors, education, screenprinting, the Festival of Sydney, The Visual Arts Board, and an observer from the Biennale Committee!

The fourth meeting, held at Paddington Town Hall on 21st of July, was more a party than a meeting, and amongst the large number of people who attended were four people who were believed to be in the running for the director's job, including the eventual director, Nick Waterlow. Two of them, including Waterlow, put forward proposals for the next Biennale. Waterlow's proposal concluded, *"The role of the Biennale coordinator and back-up staff should be to work very closely with a liaison group representing the various interests, including artists, performers, gallery people, industry, state, etc., government, community groups, students and sponsors. This would need to be carefully administered, but it is important the coordinator is in a real position to respond to ideas and suggestions and to ensure they are implemented where feasible. Unlike Venice or Sao Paulo, this could then make for a Creative Peoples Biennale while maintaining a high level of production, activity, ingenuity and dissemination - in other words a highly unique Sydney Biennale."*

*The Biennale will succeed if it exists at three levels - community, national and international.*

It was decided that a letter should be sent to the Biennale Committee setting out the group's ideas to date. This letter was to be written by a subcommittee and circulated at the next meeting, which was held at the Sculpture Centre, on the 19th August 1977.

Leon Paroissien had agreed to address this meeting and he gave a brief outline of the first two Biennales, particularly the funding, and an explanation of how the content of each was initially decided.

The letter which had been drafted was circulated at the meeting and approved. Copies were sent to all Biennale Committee members. It was a fully worked-out statement of the group's position on the Third Biennale.

Leon Paroissien replied for the Biennale Committee in early September.

*"The Committee welcomed suggestions on the form and content of the next Biennale and suggested that future meetings such as those held at The Sculpture Centre and the Paddington Town Hall may consider possible themes to be recommended for inclusion in the Biennale."*

*With regard to planning meetings between representatives of artists, interested members of the public and the Committee of the Biennale, it was felt that this should be left until the Director could take part in such discussions.*

*I outline below the Committee's response to the five ideas put forward in your letter:*

- 1. The suggestion that the emphasis should be put on involvement and co-ordination was accepted but it was resolved that the title, "Director", was important for negotiating loans and further sponsorship. It was also decided that it would not be practical for more than one person to hold such a position. It is expected that the Director will engage consultants for specific areas of the activities of the Biennale.*
- 2. It was agreed that the position should be advertised. A copy of the advertisement is enclosed.*

3. *It was felt that the advertisement was straightforward and that there was a degree of urgency to place it as soon as possible.*
4. *Since it was necessary that senior representatives of the funding organizations should be on the selection committee, it was agreed that Mr Franco Belgiorno-Nettis (representing Transfield Pty. Ltd.), Mr. Elwyn Lynn (representing the Visual Arts Board) and Mr. Peter Laverty (representing the Art Gallery of New South Wales) be appointed. Ms. Marlene Creaser has been asked to join the interviewing committee as an artist represented in the Second Biennale of Sydney.*
5. *The Committee noted your request that when assessing possible co-ordinators, priority should be given to those with previous experience in community participation.*

*I look forward to receiving further suggestions for the consideration of the Committee and I trust that the appointment of a Director will facilitate communication regarding the nature of the Third Biennale of Sydney. “*

General consensus was that the group's ideas had been, at best, given token recognition in the appointment of Marleen Creaser to the committee, although she in no way represented the group, not had anything to do with the meetings. On the whole, the group's ideas had been completely ignored.

However, Nick Waterlow was appointed to the directorship in November and, given his community arts' background, this was felt to be a considerable victory. He had been Senior Recreation Officer responsible for the development of the arts at Milton Keynes, U.K. the largest new city being built in Europe. He had initiated community arts programmes there and was, at the time of his appointment to the Biennale, teaching at Alexander Mackie College as well as being a member of the steering committee of the N.S.W. Branch of the National Community Arts' Co-operative.

It was decided that the meetings would be suspended to see how Waterlow operated in the job. His organisational method, it was discovered following his return from a trip to Europe, was to initiate a number of meetings with individual artists, to gauge their attitudes to the Biennale, to collect ideas and to look at their work. This technique, in the absence of any more general process of consultation, always seems to perpetuate the competitiveness, suspicion and isolation between artists. Each individual negotiates in a complete vacuum without even a standard minimum set of conditions.

In mid-1978 Vivienne Binns and Virginia Coventry visited Waterlow to discuss the position of women in the Biennale. Some of the suggestions made in 1977 were reiterated. As a result, a letter drafted by Vivienne and Virginia was typed and sent out by the Director's office to womens' art groups and central contacts in most capital cities in Australia.

*"The Sydney Biennale is to be held in Sydney from 12th April to 27th May, 1979.*

*Soon after the last Biennale in 1976 groups of people began meeting to discuss their criticisms of past Biennales and to put forward ideas for future Biennales, especially that of 1979.*

*A number of people, concerned in particular about the representation and interpretation of the work of women within an event such as the Biennale, were consistently active in these groups. Before the Director was appointed, submissions outlining some of the ways in which the Biennale could meet the needs of Australian women were presented to the Biennale Committee.*

*We recently approached Nick Waterlow, who is the Director for the 1979 Sydney Biennale, on this matter and suggested that this letter be sent to relevant groups in Australia. We felt, as had earlier been submitted, that a committee of women, made up of representatives ideally from each State, should be formed to search out the work of known and unknown women in Australia and ensure that a representative showing of this work be included and integrated throughout the Biennale format.*

*The purpose of this letter is exploratory. It is important that we make known to each other and to the Biennale administration, our views and expectations initially and most importantly on the matter of a committee, and also with regard to the Biennale itself. Funding for the Biennale, and hence for a committee as suggested, is a problem and would need to be quickly resolved should a committee be formed.*

*Could you please share this letter with any pertinent groups and individuals with whom you have contact, and write back immediately (as time is very limited) with ideas and information, indicating if you feel the committee is a good idea and if and how you see you could be involved. "*

The response to this letter was good, and Virginia Coventry met with Nick Waterlow again in September. A further letter was sent out to those who had responded to the first, communicating the position to that point.

*"Thank you for your response to our letter sent out by the office of the Sydney Biennale, 1979, concerning the representation of women's work. Of those we contacted approximately 20% wrote back. There were some very long letters with detailed suggestions and points of view. In this letter to those of you who responded, we wish to inform you of our follow up action and its result. We also hope to clarify certain aspects of the Biennale and explain further the nature of our involvement.*

*Many of you welcomed in your letters the idea of a committee and research. However, some of the verbal response criticised Biennales in general and some women rejected participation in the Sydney Biennale in particular because of its hierarchical organisational structure. (i.e. There is one director who in turn is responsible to a small financial committee). It is suspected that there will be inevitably an establishment bias towards a male consciousness and that the context of the Biennale structure will co-opt non-establishment work.*

Virginia Coventry met with Nick Waterlow, the Director of the 1979 Biennale, on the 21st September. The following is a resume of that meeting. There is no indication that there are any funds available to finance the activities of the proposed committee.

Nick Waterlow however, was very interested in Bonita Ely's and Erica McGilchrist's suggestions that there be a women's collective piece. He had already proposed to the finance committee that a "Women's Art Alliance" or "Women's Art Movement"

*Collective Work be included in the Biennale. He also mentioned a 'manifesto' - an idea which could perhaps be compared with Erica's suggestions for women-in-art-history, (see attached photocopy).*

## **Planning**

*The planning of the Biennale appears to be along the traditional lines of other such exhibitions - even though the overall theme is concerned with new forms in art. (The title will be 'Origins of Recent European Art').*

## **Venue**

*Although the main exhibition space is the N.S.W. Art Gallery, public parks and various galleries around Sydney are being considered in an attempt to expand the venue. Also, there has been an emphasis on performance and many of the invited European artists are likely to prefer to work in the street.*

## **Overseas Content**

*East and West European and U.K. artists were invited before local artists, as it takes longer to make overseas arrangements. Several women will be represented and/or visit.*

*The participation of any U.S. artists will depend upon aspects in their work linking it with recent European trends.*

## **Australian Content**

*Australian work is now being chosen. The choice of recent Australian art will be made on the basis of "how well it solves the problems it sets itself" - It will not necessarily need to relate to the "European aesthetic". The choice of Australian work is being made with the assistance and advice of "all the people in key positions" in the art world, (meaning artists/gallery owners/directors/curators/art administrators).*

## **A Bit of Background History**

*After the last Biennale in 1976, an ad hoc group formed in which several women actively participated. The group proposed that future biennales be organized by committees with changing membership, having an orientation towards a wider audience in the community and that alternative venues to the N.S.W. Art Gallery be used. The need for greater (e.g. 50%) representation of women and concepts concerning community arts figured strongly in the discussions. There was concern that a lot of money had been spent on past Biennales in which there was scant representation of work by women and by Australian artists in general.*

*Our first letter was sent out as a follow-up to those meetings last year. We hoped to stimulate discussions which would bring out the issues and help crystalize the views amongst women artists on their art practice and its relationship to existing systems for exhibition and distribution. We wanted to re-establish the links between those concerned so that even if the Biennale again bypasses our suggestions we will all*

*more clearly understand the place of women's art in established structures and if necessary come closer to establishing alternatives.*

*We didn't see our personal role as taking responsibility for a total course of action. We wanted to ascertain the real attitudes of the Biennale director and committee towards the inclusion of women's work; to inform other women and gauge their interest in this matter.*

### **Suggestions for Further Follow-up**

*In view of the lack of financial support for a committee and research, we suggest you contact Nick Waterlow directly, or take whatever action you feel necessary. As far as the collective piece is concerned, it is necessary that a clear proposal to Nick Waterlow be made urgently. Such a proposal should indicate the space, financial assistance and transport costs etc. required.*

*To do this, we in our particular states, will have to very quickly get ideas together and circulate them to groups in other states.*

*Organisation, co-ordination, and eventually installation are very important - are there any volunteers? Can we do it as an interstate venture? Suggestions are needed not only for the content and form but for these crucial aspects also.*

*So that's the latest. What's the next-step?"*

Meanwhile in August a Melbourne group consisting of Janine Burke, John Davis, Lesley Dumbrell, Robert Jacks, Peter Kennedy, Robert Lindsay, John Nixon and Jenny Watson had begun meeting. In a letter to Nick Waterlow on the 8th August, they said, *"As a group of artists, historians and critics who have been involved for some years in arts feminist activities, we are both interested in and concerned with the representation of women in this year's Biennale. We are aware that the bulk of the work to be exhibited this year will come from Europe but we would like to have your response regarding Australian content in general and the representation of women artists in particular. "*

This was the opening shot in a new series of negotiations with the Biennale organisers and began with a lengthy but illuminating correspondence; Waterlow replied on the 18th August -

*"You should have received a letter from Vivienne Binns about women's participation in next year's Biennale. We, in fact, sent these letters out and once a significant number of replies have been received, I will be discussing their content with Vivienne.*

*There will be Australian participation in every section of the Biennale, including the core section and an exhibition of work on paper that will be alongside Dr. Wieland Schmied's European show, and works involving photography alongside Pontus Hulten's show. There will also be an International Video Festival and some special events. Women's work will, of course, be included throughout these areas, You might be interested to know that Valie Export, Ulrike Rosenbach and Marina Abramovic plan to be here for the Biennale and, I am sure, would be interested in coming to*



*Melbourne. Please let me know if you require further details about them. Also, Heather Waddell, who is part of the Women's Art Alliance in London, may well be coming out and you might also be interested in getting her down to Melbourne.*

On the 28th August the group wrote to Leon Paroissien -

*"As a group of Melbourne artists we have written to Mr. Nick Waterlow regarding the 1979 Sydney Biennale in order to stress our interest and concern in the representation of Australian artists. We have suggested to Mr. Waterlow that we would like to meet with him to further discuss representation.*

*We feel that the Sydney Biennale raises other issues regarding the presentation and promotion of Australian artists. It would seem appropriate to appoint a commissioner to officially represent the work of Australian artists to visiting critics, journalists, curators and dealers.*

*A grant made available for this purpose would cover the activities of the commissioner as well as documentation and information kits on all Australian artists in the Biennale. In this way information regarding Australian artists would be widely disseminated and such a liaison between the commissioner and visiting professionals could encourage a positive, ongoing programme of exhibitions of Australian art being seen internationally.*

*We stress that artists have not as yet been approached to complete work for the Biennale and feel that if a commissioner were appointed soon artists could work with this person in order to present a thoroughly professional Australian contribution to the Biennale.*

On the 11th September they again wrote to Nick Waterlow -

*"In response to our telephone conversation of September 3, I discussed your request for a list of Australian artists working within designated areas with a group of Melbourne artists and others who have been meeting informally to discuss Australian representation in the Sydney Biennale.*

*We are concerned that by slotting Australian artists into categories previously designed for European artists that the scope and the diversity of Australian art may not be seen to its best advantage.*

*We are opposed to exhibitions that re-inforce cultures from abroad at the expense of Australian talent and feel that this situation must be balanced by an equal representation of Australian artists with their European counterparts.*

*While we appreciate the style and taste emphasized by the proposed core exhibition Origins of Recent European Art we believe that an accompanying show examining similar trends and developments in recent Australian art would satisfactorily display the achievements of local artists and redress a balance that at present is clearly weighted in favour of European artists.*

*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. Although we have been meeting in an informal way, it may be necessary to call a public meeting of Melbourne artists to thoroughly discuss this situation and its implications for all Australian artists. “*

There was a clear difference of approach between the Melbourne group and the earlier Sydney meetings. The Sydney meetings had shown little direct concern for the problem of Australia's relationship to the international art scene. It was at the time a problem far in the future. They were more concerned with changing the high culture of the event, with giving it a broader community base and with developing more democratic forms of organization which would allow much wider participation.

They had gained only a mild, and ultimately, ineffective reform, the installation of a community arts-oriented director. The meetings, as such, had therefore lapsed, although individuals and smaller groups had continued to meet with the Director on specific issues.

It had become clear, however, that the reformist idea of installing a more suitable director made no difference when all other basic structures and attitudes remained unchanged. It had also become clear that the Third Biennale would be basically the same as the Second, with only the names changed. It was therefore, at this point, that a new approach emerged, the approach of the Melbourne group. This approach aimed at organising for specific claims in the context of a high culture, professional -artist oriented Biennale, claims in regards to representation, conditions etc.

On the 26th September they received a reply from Franco Belgiorno-Nettis –

*"Thank you for your letter to Mr Waterlow of September 11 to which I am replying as it was discussed at the recent Biennale Committee meeting.*

*I can assure you that recent Australian art is in no sense being treated as a second class citizen in the forthcoming Biennale, and that its scope and diversity will be well exhibited. I feel you slightly misunderstand the purpose of the Biennale, which is to provide a unique opportunity for artists and the public to become aware of cultural trends taking place in the rapidly changing world outside.*

*So little is seen here of recent European art and yet so many people are of European descent that this Biennale might do a little to correct this imbalance, but it certainly won't "reinforce cultures from abroad at the expense of Australian talent".*

*The Committee agreed that there does exist a real need for an annual exhibition of developing Australian work which could be mounted each year in different States. The best answer to the questions raised might be for your group to persuade the Victorian Arts Ministry to initiate this event in the near future in Melbourne. The fact that the Biennale takes place in Sydney is no handicap to artists in other parts of the country, as the best will always be asked to take part, but our limited budget does mean we have to work within our self-imposed boundaries.*

*I do hope I have satisfied your enquiries."*

Leon Paroissien also replied -

*"Your letter of 28 August was discussed by the Board of the Biennale of Sydney at a meeting on 20 September. The Australian selection has not been finalized and while there was a general feeling at the meeting that it would not be possible to appoint an Australian Commissioner at this stage, there was no resolution taken.*

*The Visual Arts Board at a meeting on 28 September strongly supported the sentiments expressed in your letter, but agreed that this was a matter for the Board of the Biennale and asked me to raise the subject again at the next Biennale meeting to be held in the next two or three weeks. "*

The Melbourne group, at this point, decided to put forward a specific set of demands. They were contained in a letter of the 20th October -

*"Thank you for your letter of September 26 which was presented to the committee of concerned Melbourne artists who are presently meeting to discuss the Sydney Biennale.*

*Since receiving your letter we have had a discussion with the director of the Biennale, Nick Waterlow, during his recent visit to Melbourne. It was decided at this meeting to communicate the following points to both yourself and the Sydney Biennale committee.*

*We continue to remain concerned regarding the slotting of Australian artists into categories previously designed for European artists and that the scope and diversity of Australian art may not be seen to its best advantage. We are opposed to exhibitions that reinforce the primacy of cultures abroad in relation to our own culture and at the expense of Australian talent.*

*The degree of Australian representation presently being considered constitutes only a token representation of Australian art and so, by implication, devalues or downgrades the range and quality of Australian art.*

*We have also considered the question of tokenism in relation to the existing attitudes of the general public towards Australian art and believe that the Biennale Committee's brief to its director is incorrect in that such a brief will simply reinforce the ever present inferiority complex commonly known as "the cultural cringe".*

*The present chairman of the Sydney Biennale committee, Elwyn Lynn, in writing on the Australian representation at the most recent Venice Biennale stated, "I wonder if it is characteristic to add that the Venice experience reveals that Australia has a better art than its public suspects". Why not give the Australian public the opportunity to also become familiar with this fact! 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. Within this context it would be possible for European critics and art writers, who will be visiting Australia, to see recent Australian work. We believe that it will be Australian art*

*which will be of interest to the European critics and art writers and not the European art which they're already familiar with. We see this as being particularly important for the future place of Australian art in an international context.*

*In our discussions with the director of the Biennale we presented the following requests:*

*There should be thirty-five Australian artists to match the core group of thirty-five European artists;*

*Of the thirty-five Australian artists, there should be a 50% representation of women artists;*

*If the funds available for the Biennale are insufficient for this number of artists, then the number of European artists be reduced with a similar decrease in the Australian representation;*

*We respectfully suggest that in accordance with the above the Exhibition be re-titled "Origins of Recent European and Australian Art".*

*The point we are making in our request for 50% representation of Australian women artists is based on our recognition of the cultural impact women's work has had on Australian art in recent years. It is an impact reflected not only in women's work but also in male artists work, most notably an increased concern with personal as opposed to purely formal preoccupation's. We see a 50% representation of women artists as a means by which we can get the cultural record straight!*

*Like the Biennale committee we most certainly do agree with the necessity for "an annual exhibition of developing Australian work" but we disagree with your suggestion that we should "persuade the Victorian Arts Ministry to initiate this event in the near future in Melbourne". Our concern is with the Sydney Biennale, a situation which presently exists, and which we wish to see rectified.*

*Earlier we were concerned with the apparent concentration on the Sydney art scene. It appears, having met Nick Waterlow, that other centres of activity are also being considered. We are appreciative of this attitude.*

Simultaneously, they sent a copy of all correspondence to the Sydney Womens Art Group asking them if they could help by organising support in Sydney. This was done at first by putting the Melbourne demands in the form of a petition which was distributed to all the major galleries, art schools and other institutions. When this had been done another meeting was arranged at the Art Workshop, Sydney University on the 9th November. It was organised and attended by a core of people from the first series of meetings and many others previously uninvolved, a total of twenty people, a good attendance for a meeting advertised only two days beforehand. Amongst those who attended were also two people from the Melbourne group, John Nixon and Leslie Dumbrell.

Either because of the slightly different cross section of people attending the meeting or because consciousness in the art community had risen, or both, the issue of 50%

representation of women was no longer contentious. The meeting unanimously supported the Melbourne demands, and debate centred instead on extending these and framing them in a more sophisticated form. It was feared that the Biennale Committee could be able to give the appearance of fulfilling these demands by staging an inexpensive, ancillary exhibition or exhibitions outside the main Biennale exhibition at the Art Gallery of N.S.W., thus technically raising the number of Australian and women artists. An outline of a letter to Nick Waterlow was drafted and this was sent several days later. It contained a deadline for a reply, and a second meeting was scheduled for the day after the deadline.

*"In response to the petition being circulated by a group of Melbourne artists, a meeting was held in Sydney on November 9th to further discuss the Sydney Biennale. Dissatisfaction on many levels was expressed by those present on matters concerning the conception, organisation and structure of the Biennale. It was generally felt that our earlier recommendations, that the Biennale give emphasis to community-orientated work, have been largely disregarded.*

*In light of this meeting -*

1. *We wish to express complete support for the first three demands put forward by the Melbourne artists. To reiterate them:*
  - i. *There should be thirty five Australian artists to match the core group of thirty five European artists,*
  - ii *Of the thirty five Australian artists, there should be a 50%, representation of women artists,*
  - iii, *If the funds available for the Biennale are insufficient for this number of artists, then the number of European artists should be reduced with a similar decrease in the Australian representation.*
2. *To these, we add a demand that in all sections of the Biennale the same conditions hold for Australian artists as for artists of other countries - e.g. equivalent space, equivalent expenses etc.*
3. *It has been a policy with many of the large international exhibitions to make a clear statement setting out the structure and aims of the show. If this has been done for the Sydney Biennale, then it certainly has not been made public. So we request clarification (in writing) on the following points:*
  - a) *what are the general aims of the organisation of this Sydney Biennale? (e.g. what is meant by the title 'European dialogue'?)*
  - b) *what will be its structure?*
  - c) *who is being invited (irrespective of who actually accepts), including Australian artists? (If the lists are as yet not finalised, when can we expect them*

*to be finalised?)*

*d) each section (including a breakdown of the invited Australian artists and foreign)?*

*e) on what basis has the selection been made (including the Australian artists)?*

*f) what venues will be used for which sections of the Biennale and for which groups of artists?*

*g) what is the general policy on artists' expenses (including both personal expenses and material expenses)?"*

4. *Since a considerable amount of public money is being spent, this should be publicly accountable. So we request a statement clearly indicating sources of funding and a breakdown of the intended allocation of that money, as well as the basis of the decisions for those allocations.*

5. *We would be pleased to receive a written response to the above by Monday, 20th November, 1978.*

*In light of the concern expressed by many of the local art community, we feel the above demands are both reasonable and justified.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Toni Robertson, Jenny Barber, Liz Ashburn, Peter Travis, Joan Grounds, John Nixon, Giuseppe Pirone, Virginia Coventry, Lynn Silverman, John Penny, Nigel Lendon, Tim Burns, Ian Burn, Terry Reid, Michiel Dolk, Geoffrey Legge, Betty Kelly, Ian Milliss.*

No written reply was received by the stated deadline, but in phone calls to several people Waterlow stated that the number of women and other Australian artists in the ancillary shows (such as the photography exhibition to be held at the Photography Centre) would bring the numbers in both these categories up to 50%. This was a response that had been anticipated; both the Director and the Biennale committee seemed determined to reject any input at all from the art community, despite earlier posturing about the necessity for consultation. On the day of the deadline the Biennale Director and Chairman issued a press release containing the full list of invited artists, none of whom had received letters confirming their inclusion in the exhibition, although many had been led to believe they were invited. This bureaucratic inefficiency led to further distrust of the Biennale organisers. Several artists, in fact, only became aware of their inclusion upon seeing their names on the press release.

Shortly before the 21st November meeting, Waterlow rang Ian Milliss and told him the press release should be considered an answer to the group's letter. As such, it could only be seen as a complete rebuff. Of the sixty two individuals artists invited, only nineteen were Australian. Of the nineteen Australian, only five were women, which ironically gave them parity with the overseas women, of whom there were only five, a total of ten women out of sixty two.

The meeting which followed was heated. It had been widely advertised and was attended by almost twice as many people as the previous meeting. The refusal of the Biennale organisers to even acknowledge receipt of the letter from the previous meeting was seen as indicative of both their contempt for the real wishes of the art community and their inability to cope with the fact that people could articulate their demands and organise around them. Their attitude clearly made nonsense of the Biennale's title "European Dialogue" which was now generally parodied as "European Monologue" (although one Biennale employee referred to the exhibition as the "Sydney Banal"). Two main strategies emerged from the meeting. The first was that a letter should be drafted approaching all overseas artists for an expression of support on the issue. This letter was written by Ian Burn, John Penny and Terry Reid, but was never posted, as other events overtook it.

*"We are writing to inform you of some matters arising from the organization of the Third Biennale of Sydney. We have made a number of recommendations to the Biennale Committee, all of which have been completely ignored. Simply, the main conflicts are these:*

- 1. We made a recommendation for an artist-elected representatives on the Biennale Committee. This has been ignored.*
- 2. Throughout the planning of the Biennale, all decisions have been made behind a closed door. We feel the art community has deliberately been kept uninformed.*
- 3. We are interested in a situation which encourages genuine dialogue between all artists. The actions of the Biennale Committee suggest it is more interested in the appearance of a dialogue than in its reality. (For example, our request for your address and all other addresses was denied to us.*
- 4. We feel strongly than the Biennale, as it is presently constituted, discriminates against Australian art and artists. The Australian representatives have been selected by imposing the categories considered appropriate for European artists. We feel this cannot adequately reflect the diversity of activities and concerns in Australia. Obviously this will restrict dialogue.*
- 5. Women have been especially discriminated against in all sections of the Biennale. We are unwilling to support an exhibition which perpetuates such an obvious bias.*
- 6. Since a large amount of public money is being spent on the Biennale, we feel it should reflect the interests and desires of the art community, rather than those of a small bureaucratic clique.*

*Would you please acknowledge receipt of this letter, and tell us whether you support our position."*

The other main strategy was the organisation of a boycott of the Biennale. This was seen more as a threat than as a likely eventuality, simply because it was believed that the Biennale organisers would undoubtedly make some concessions if faced with a real show of strength. Almost half of the invited Australian artists were present at the meeting, and several others present had already refused to participate. The consensus

was that the 50% representation of women was the major issue, with the proviso that they must be in the core exhibition and that all conditions must be equal to those of overseas artists. It was also felt that it would be an easy issue to win. The 50% representation of Australian artists would come after the demand on women. A decision was made that those artists present who were in the Biennale would meet and organise to approach the other invited artists, not present at the meeting. They proposed to discuss the issue with them and hopefully to get some expression of support similar to that expected from the overseas artists.

It was at this point that the break in solidarity occurred which prevented any gains other than the basic 50% representation of women. After the meeting that night and over the next several days, a small number of the invited artists expressed distrust of the others at the meeting, saying that they feared they would not be supported if they boycotted the exhibition. They also claimed that if no concessions were made by the Biennale organisers, they would feel under pressure to withdraw, from others who, since they were not invited, "had nothing to lose". They felt it was important that they should begin meeting on their own in order to avoid any pressure that might be exerted by others, but also to ascertain the support amongst all the invited artists.

On the other hand, those who had not been invited saw these fears as unfounded and representing an unconscious exclusivist attitude which corresponded to those attitudes the Biennale organisers stood for. A restricted meeting was organised which was attended by almost all the invited Sydney artists. The letters from the Melbourne group were circulated, including the letters to and from women artists. It became clear that although almost half the artists present had been involved in the meetings, the other half felt little support for greater representation of Australian artists. Few were prepared to withdraw, whether the demands were met or not. It was argued that there was already a large representation of Australian artists and that, since the function of overseas Biennales was to exhibit artists from other places in the host country, there had already been gains on this issue.

However, a majority supported the concept of 50% representation of women. One point made was that the development of art in the 1970's pivoted on the contribution of women artists (a straight art issue rather than a sexist one), but it seems that Waterlow had mainly gone to the studios of men, not women. It was suggested that a meeting between Waterlow and the invited artists be organised to discuss the issue. Other events at the time suggest that the women's issue was consciously dragged out, having already been conceded at this time by Waterlow and his supporting circle of (male) artists.

This meeting was held in the Biennale office at the Australia Council. The principle of 50% representation of women was endorsed by that meeting. However, it was also suggested that individual artists should lobby various members of the Biennale Committee to accept the principle. The women involved, as a group, rejected lobbying as a tactic in this instance. They felt that it had now been almost universally accepted as a fact that discrimination against women existed and that this should stop. In spite of this women still had to fight, in this instance, as in every other area of their lives, to bring this principle to reality. They saw lobbying as a tactic for the pleading of a special case and unsuitable for what should be a matter of course. Instead a



deputation was chosen to attend the next meeting of the Biennale Committee. Waterlow agreed to support the deputation.

By this time rumours abounded. Amongst some members of the group who were not invited, an impromptu decision had been made not to support the letter to overseas artists. They felt nothing would be gained by it without the united backing of both the invited artists and those not invited. Due to the breakdown in communication between the two groups, this unity no longer existed.

The lack of solidarity which the invited artists feared had now become real.

It can be seen in retrospect that this disagreement was a playing out of all the values which art institutions, especially exhibitions like the Biennale, seek to perpetuate. The romantic individualist myth of the artist shows itself in practice as suspicion and distrust of other artists, paranoia about their motives, refusal to recognise interests in common, and over-competitiveness. We were all guilty of this, both the invited and uninvited artists displaying these traits in abundance. This was exacerbated by the fact that no general meetings were being held, and each faction only found out what the other was doing by way of rumours.

At this point, in early December, before the Biennale Committee meeting, an artist close to the Biennale organisers hinted that "there would be 50% women just so long as there was no more trouble". This was just not on, and a lot of time was spent discussing tactics should this rumour be correct. The discussion was resolved by a phone call from Nick Waterlow who said that the committee would agree to 50% representation, and that there was no need for the deputation to attend the committee meeting. This was, however, 50% women in the Australian section only. In the overseas section there still remained only five women out of forty three artists, approximately 12%.

The nastiest aspect of the event had been the necessity to argue yet again, over and over again, that discrimination exists in art as everywhere else. The effort required was boring and exhausting, leaving little for much else. Since those involved were all invited to be participants, they resented the expenditure of time and energy they would rather have devoted to their work. The Biennale Committee subsequently issued a press release which hinted that they had magnanimously conceded to sectional interests in increasing the number of Australian women artists.

There was one more meeting which six people attended. An invited female artist explained what had happened in the meeting of invited artists and explained the decisions of the female artists and two of the male artists. It was agreed by those people at this meeting that the action taken had been appropriate, that was, to go ahead and submit work to the Biennale and to continue collective decision making between those invited and those not invited. It had also been decided by the invited artists that it was important not to name publicly those women who had first been invited apart from those invited after 50% representation had been granted. These decisions had been made in consultation with invited Melbourne artists. Because of the poor showing at this general meeting (in December) it was decided there would be no more general meetings until after Christmas. However, the divisions had become so great that no more meetings were held.

The final episode in this saga was the decision made by a group involved in various different phases of the negotiations to produce this publication. Although the overall group which had attended the meetings was somewhat in disarray at the end, the inclusion of 50% women in the Biennale must be seen as a major victory. However, it is easy to win a battle and still lose the war if victories are not consolidated. Now that the principle has been conceded in this major exhibition, it must be institutionalised as a principle for all contemporary survey shows.

We feel that this documentation of events and compilation of some of the attitudes to the issues surrounding the Biennale is the necessary basis of an analysis which will assist future action.

Vivienne Binns & Ian Milliss

Assisted in parts by:

The Women's Art Group

**Source: Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring: Comments from the Art Community**