

A MODEL FOR RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ARTISTS & EXHIBITION ORGANISERS – Vicki Varvaressos & Nigel London

The New South Wales branch of the Artworkers Union has prepared a contract for artists invited to participate in the 1982 Sydney Biennale. This action is a consequence of the Union's general concern with the way in which publicly-funded exhibitions are conducted, as well as a widespread realisation of the need for artists to develop avenues for negotiation with those responsible for organising these exhibitions.

The Union sees its role in this situation as protecting the interests of its members and, in so doing, acting to secure the rights of all artworkers. In the past, issues of equity, copyright and moral rights, as well as the circumstances in which work is represented, have been taken for granted. Artists have found themselves reacting to issues after they have become evident and acting in isolation when their interests are threatened.

In one sense, the history of the Artworkers Union began when a number of artists became concerned about the selection process of Australian artists for the 1979 Biennale. Ad hoc meetings in Melbourne and Sydney led to the first stages of organisation, and the Biennale was eventually persuaded to increase the number of Australian women invited to exhibit. It was widely expressed that artworkers were sick of being placed in a reactive relationship to the decisions of exhibition organisers and the policies of governments and their funding bodies, and that the development of a representative organisation was necessary. The subsequent formation of the Union and its branches in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia resulted in the first national conference in Adelaide in October 1980. Discussion of issues related to publicly-funded survey exhibitions of contemporary art like the Biennale led to the acceptance of the principles of equity in all matters of representation.

The reactions to the Union's attempts to get the current Biennale Committee to clarify its plans and attitudes towards equity in representation and other issues have been both patronising and uncooperative. For nearly eighteen months, the Union has been asking straightforward questions, but to no avail. The committee has avoided its responsibility to the artists' community, offering instead "informal personal discussion" with Committee members, rather than meaningful responses which would provide a basis for discussion. The Union has maintained that to engage in this kind of "discussion" serves to perpetuate the problems of privileged access which permeates the art bureaucracy. There is nothing wrong with talking things over, unless private deals and special relationships with a few is the consequence. From the other direction, the art bureaucracy needs to adopt a more "business-like" approach to the art community so that all artists know where they stand. As an organisation representing a significant proportion of the art community, the Union has held that it has a legitimate right to be treated other than by the "informal" politics of personality. The question of public accountability for public funding should underlie the whole process of planning such an event.

The Biennale should serve as a kind of model of relationships between sponsors, organisers, artworkers and its public. As an exhibition, it is not only significant for

the precedents established in 1979, but for a number of other reasons as well. In the first instance, it is the exhibition with the highest level of public funding for contemporary art in Australia (responses to our enquiries from funding bodies indicate that the Visual Arts Board is providing \$85,000, the NSW Premier's Department \$25,000, the Sydney City Council \$12,000 and the Aboriginal Arts Board \$8,000). It also receives an undisclosed sum from Transfield Pty Ltd (Franco Belgiorno-Nettis is the chairperson of the Biennale Committee), and further undisclosed sums from overseas governments supporting their own artists. The Art Gallery of NSW provides space and curatorial and technical support, and undoubtedly the Biennale receives support from other sources as well. Its further significance lies in its ability to generate a greater amount of publicity than any other exhibition of contemporary art, inevitably drawing attention to a comparison between imported and local art.

In this context the historical assumptions of the "higher standards" of overseas art are located within the perspective of an unequal "dialogue" which perpetuates a sense of cultural inferiority. To judge Australian art by overseas standards is as misguided as judging overseas art by Australian standards. However, given these problems, we still need to participate (and on an equal basis) in the Biennale, as it remains the most important contemporary art event in the country, and as such is one of the few venues for viewing contemporary Australian art. The Biennale Committee's lack of recognition of the significance of these questions is evidenced by its unwillingness to respond in any substantive way.

In these circumstances, the Union has prepared a contract for use by artists invited to participate. The contract will prove to be a useful document in securing basic rights for artists in this particular instance, and also to serve as a model for future exhibitions of this kind. It is based on the policies of the Union in relation to the basic principles of equity, moral rights, copyright and the payment of fees for representation (based on the precedent established by CARFAC, the Canadian Artists Union, which is increasingly being accepted in other countries). The Union is publishing the contract in Art Network so that artists can familiarise themselves with the document which is the basis for present discussion.

Copies are available from the Union at the address below or from any of the State branches. The Union wishes to thank Shane Simpson and Peter Banki for their advice in preparing this document.

Postscript

Since the time of writing (late November) negotiations have begun with the Biennale over a number of issues including the contract. While there seems to be support in principle for the use of the contract, negotiations are still at an early stage.

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