

## CORREGGIO JONES: THE HERO OF THE SYDNEY BIENNALE - Ian Burn

With nearly half a million people out-of-work in Australia, there should be huge crowds thronging to the Art Gallery daily for the Third Sydney Biennale. And why not? Well, there are a few important reasons why they won't be there. Most people know only too well that events like the Biennale are not for them.

How would you feel if you were young, unemployed, living in Blacktown, and you fronted up to see the Biennale? (Are there special concessions for admitting unemployed people? Is the Biennale advertised around the C.E.S.'s? Should free buses be run from the areas of highest unemployment to the Gallery?) Suppose you actually went inside the Gallery - after all, it is not any more intimidating than going inside the Law Courts or Taxation building. What would you make of the exhibition, works by local artists and works which have been shipped half-way around the world for people to see? Would you feel it was all a rather expensive self-indulgence on the part of the artists? How would you react to the idea that these are examples of the most creative work from any number of countries? Would you feel the Biennale was meant to touch your life in some special way?

No - the Biennale isn't for the unemployed! So let's analyse what the Biennale is and who it is for.

Over the past thirty years, Biennale has come to refer to a special event designed for showing a particular kind of art. As an event, it is not an appropriate form for surveying the full range of work being produced in a country at one time; nor is it really appropriate for examining community-oriented work. It is not appropriate for most kinds of art. As presently conceived, it is only good as a way of promoting those artists in each country who adhere to one particular and narrow definition of art, one which is a function of the ultra-competitive art market-place.

In other words, a Biennale gives important institutional support for the avant-gardist (see below) point-of-view within modern art. These state-funded 'international showcases' do much to retain that definition of art before everyone's eyes. Under these conditions, other attitudes towards making art are made to look trivial, unadventurous, provincial, and generally just not-as-important.

But the avant-gardist position has come under much critical fire during the past ten to fifteen years. Admittedly, the majority of people including many artists, have always found avant-garde art fairly incomprehensible or unacceptable. But today it seems that an increasing number of artists and students are rejecting avant-gardism as a worthwhile way of making art.

On top of that, the notion of Biennale-type exhibitions themselves have come up for a lot of criticism, even by some of the regular participants. It makes things a bit too obvious. Many artists have realized that Biennales are not for them, but are really for the art market. Biennales are one of the important ways of sorting out the market rankings of artists, the now well-established top 100 international artists for investors. Even the most dyed-in-the-wool avant-gardists are more than a bit embarrassed by that!

What then is the avant-gardist point-of-view? Lucy Lippard (a New York critic) once suggested that the actual audience for this kind of art was probably a mere three thousand people around the world. In Australia, we would guess at no more than fifty to one hundred people committed to it. Make no mistake - that is about the number of people this Biennale is for.

Avant-gardism is an attitude which disengages the artist from the real (the social etc.) world. It is an attitude of mind in which socially progressive values are devalued or ignored. In place of this engagement, it offers endless formal innovation (i.e. built-in market obsolescence), the trivialization of content, and a get-rich-quick market.

While it helps to understand its nineteenth century sources, it is not too difficult to grasp the role that the avant-gardist tradition has played during the post- 1945 period. It is very clearly represented by the Detroit-line updating of styles which took off in the Cold War Fifties and ran right through the Vietnam-War-Sixties. But it hasn't been doing too well lately. It still has the marketing machinery well greased, and there is still a Rockefeller-scale investment in this sort of art around the capitalist world. But considering the array of styles during the sixties - Pop, Hard-Edge and Colour Field, Op Art, Happenings, Lyrical Abstraction, Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, Earthworks, Arte Povera, Body Art, Performance, Video Art, Photo-Realism, etc. - we have to ask the embarrassing question: whatever happened to the 1970's? Here we are at the end of the seventies and this tradition has not been able to come up with a single hit movement, only endless revivals of the fifties and sixties pushed forward with Biennale-like indiscretion.

Why has this happened? Why has the avant-garde tradition collapsed? There are many reasons. In the late sixties, the capitalist world slid into a long period of recession and crisis – and the art market shifted its loose cash into 'blue chip' investments, established recent 'masters'. Quite literally, there has not been available the sort of speculative capital needed to support a rapid succession of avant-garde styles during the seventies. Throughout the sixties, there had been plenty of money made during the economic boom of the fifties and early sixties, the period of greatest export of American capital.

So the economic conditions weren't there in the seventies to support avant-gardism. But it seems neither was the personal motivation on the part of younger artists. About the time of the midsixties, a lot of people began to realize that the world wasn't quite the way that America wanted us all to believe. The Vietnam War, black nationalism and liberation movements, the CIA, corporate manipulation and greed, campus riots, the exploitation of Third World countries to sustain the American 'way of life' - these and many other factors politicized the community. Artists also developed a far more critical attitude towards the world ... and also towards their art. Many of them realized the contradictions were so great that they couldn't be resolved within the avant-garde tradition. What has happened during the seventies (and isn't included in events like the Biennale) is the mushrooming of many 'non-avant--gardist movements': artists going out and working within real communities, making posters, helping communities do their own street murals, forming women's groups, working with the labour movement, social and politically-active groups, and so on.

The dominant thrust during the fifties and sixties, one which was a function of the art market and its investors, was towards styles which had no voice to criticize the very society in which the artists lived. These were the art styles of an affirmative culture. For many younger artists, artists who had not invested their time and careers in those styles, it was a situation they could not stomach.

Some of the critiques of the avant-garde tradition are quite detailed and specific. For example, there is its consistent discrimination against women and their art. In general it discriminates against women as do most things in this society. But in particular it discriminates against women's art which doesn't conform to the male-oriented avant-gardist criteria. What has occurred since the late sixties is that all women's art which can be interpreted as conforming to avant-gardist standards has been singled out as one (minor) strand of the tradition. But the appropriation of women's art in this context denies or devalues the social and cultural experiences of women. Not surprisingly, there are many women who see this direction as not in their best interests.

The avant-gardist standard excludes all those experiences which it cannot transform. For example, the mutual or collective experiences of women are acceptable only insofar as they can be isolated, objectified and formally contemplated. In other words, so they are no longer lived or real experiences. Similarly, social commitment or political activism is acceptable only in an objectified form, so that it no longer exists as a living dialectical process, so that it cannot really affect anyone.

What is the Sydney Biennale and why does it happen? Given the history of cultural administration in Australia, it isn't very surprising for someone to come up with the idea of a Sydney Biennale half-way through the seventies. It is about what we should expect - it may even be what we deserve.

A similar kind of foresight and wisdom was shown by Robert G. Menzies when he attempted to create an Australian Academy in the late 1930's, modelled after the British Royal Academy. At that time, the academic tradition in Australia was faltering and being challenged by luke-warm versions of modernism. An Academy was seen by Menzies as the most effective way of embalming academicism as the Official Art of Australia.

The situation with the Biennale was not so different. At a time when many artists are rejecting avant-gardism as aesthetically narrow and culturally bankrupt, we are confronted with an attempt to embalm that version of art in an Official Biennale.

The Biennial isn't an idea which grew out of the art community. It isn't an idea shaped by the needs of the art community. It is an idea that has been imposed on the art community and everyone else. It was initiated largely by Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, a businessman and art-buff who seems to know more about buff than art, and who previously brought us such spectaculars as the Transfield Prize, a sort of Olympics for local artists during the sixties.

What sort of work will be seen in this Biennale? First we need to set the record straight on the invited overseas artists, who are being used to establish the structure and priorities of this Biennale. All are readily identifiable with particular strands of

avant-gardism. Most of them have been hawked around the endless survey shows of avant-gardism in Europe and America during the past ten or fifteen years. This Biennale is a belated effort to plug into this scene.

The list of artists is easy to sort out. Thumb through a few back issues of 'Flash Art' and you will find most of them. Roughly they fall into two broadly inter-related camps: one is a Fluxus/Happenings/New Realist/Action Destruction grouping based in the earlier sixties; the second is an Earthworks/Conceptual Art/Body Art/Performance grouping based in the later sixties. In the first grouping one can place Arman, Beuys, Brecht, Export, Gostomski, Kantor, Nitsch, Rainer, Spoerri, Tinguely, Vautier, and others. In the second grouping are Barber, Boltanski, Boyle, Broodthaers, Brouwn, Buren, Burgin, Dadson, Darboven, Dibbets, Dimitrijevic, Fulton, Gerz, Luthi, Merz, Panamarenko, Paolini, Poirier, Rinke, Rosenbach, Van Elk, and others. Some artists come up in both groupings, but this merely points to the aesthetic and ideological continuity between the groupings in Europe. The overall ideology of the work selected is firmly rooted in the sixties (or fifties in a few cases), and the work is representative of artists who have remained oblivious to or made token adjustments towards the social and political shifts during the seventies.

The choice of artists is quite specific, narrow and self-evident. When Director Waterlow (News Release, Nov 21, 1978) states that his selection doesn't represent any "dominant 'ism' avantgarde, or style" and that his basis for selection "arises from the feeling that pluralism exists in both contemporary Australian and European art" one can only hope it was a statement made for comic effect. The "pluralism" represented is a narrow range of avant-garde options from the sixties. In another instance, Waterlow commented that on his jaunts around Europe there was surprising unanimity about who should be on the list of artists for the Biennale (stated in a talk given at the Sydney College of the Arts, Nov. 1978). Why on earth should anyone be surprised about that? Once the commitment is made to the avant-gardist market scene, the existing rankings make the selection a mere routine!

As someone who was intimately involved with the avant-garde scene in the late sixties, perhaps I need to clarify my position, my relation to this work. I don't reject it - however I am very critical of it. I am sympathetically aware of certain of the virtues of the work, the utopian hopes which were associated with much of it. I am also acutely aware of its failings, the inability of the work to become engaged with concrete issues. But it is history. The world has moved on, into an economic recession and social turmoil - many of the artists have moved on too, reformulating their practices in relation to real needs. Such artists are not represented in the Biennale. But artists whose careers dominate their understanding of the world are very well represented - and inclusion in shows like this is their reward.

This analysis is not meant to suggest that the sort of work in the Biennale shouldn't be seen at all. It has an historical niche, in art's terms, and should be seen for what it is. But no bullshit titles like "European Dialogue", as if it represents all that is going on in Europe, and as if genuine dialogue might take place within this ossified form. No - call it something like "Aspects of the Dying Avant-Garde Tradition in Europe". Put in this light, it becomes a different question altogether for local artists as to whether they want to participate or not!

But what about work whose content stands opposed to all this, surely it will still convey its message within the context of the Biennale? While many of the invited Australian artists produce their art with only this avant-gardist context in mind, there are others who don't. The work of some of the invited Australian artists reflects at least a healthy ambiguity, as if they were hoping for something other (better) than this context for their work. But in the Biennale, their work will inevitably look avant-gardist. That is all the other possible meanings will be excluded, its meaning will be reduced to one single 'art-historical' meaning, it will be understood and appreciated in that one way. Other meanings, many of which are culturally far richer and socially more relevant, are forgotten about. That is the way people coming to see the work will understand it; that is the impact it will have; that is the impact it will have on younger artists and students - people perhaps who are struggling not so much to become engaged in their art but rather to make their art engaged with the actual world, its problems and contradictions.

I feel this point cannot be emphasized enough. We should never underestimate the capacity for the avant-gardist context, especially in its institutionalized cultural form (e.g. a Biennale), to appropriate and transform the meaning of the work we do. Even 'Mein Kampf' would look (appropriately?) – like a work of Conceptual Art in this setting!

So - who is the Biennale for, and what can we do about it? The values and standards of avant-gardism in its recent state are derived from and dominated by the international art marketing system. These values are specific only to the country(s) dominating the market and the class which can most afford to participate in this market.

It is clear who this show is good for. It is good for the few cultural bureaucrats and dilettante enthusiasts seeking to enhance their 'international' (multi-national?) image and to reproduce the class relations and the culture-by association that they aspire to.

Their avenue for achieving this lies in demonstrating that Australian artists can do 'as good' work as European and American artists!

The Sydney Biennale is just another show designed to prove how Australian art is the same as European and/or American (while permitting a few meaningless idiosyncrasies, gumleaves, etc.). By demonstrating how it is 'the same', we are made aware only of its dependence (... of course, some would prefer to call the 'sameness' a coincidence, but since none of the values evolved here that is a delusion). This attitude conforms to a major thrust within the art of the fifties and sixties (i.e. art largely dominated by American values). This thrust was towards a cultural uniformity on an international scale. We have witnessed the coca-colonization which has taken place within 'mass' cultural fields, as well as within high art circles. Insofar as this uniformity has been imposed here, our art has become 'culture-less'.

Now this doesn't mean we should consider our 'independence' as the only value in art, since that leads to narrow insularity and jingoism. What we have to develop is a clearer understanding of both our 'dependence' and our independence'. One of the things which is very clear to me now is the extent to which the work I was doing during the sixties entailed the suppression of my own (non-American, non-European)

cultural history. Of course, suppression wasn't how it appeared then - rather it was a process of devaluation of what was specific to my cultural history. Aspects of that history might be incorporated as subject matter, offering amusingly idiosyncratic interest, but subject-matter in such work is just a veneer, something which is superficially introduced and doesn't emerge out of a struggle with content. The substantial content of the work was ideologically predetermined by the avant-garde tradition within which it was produced. Any values unsympathetic to this ideological character were excluded or suppressed. The effect of this was to make my practice of art alienated from my cultural experiences. (I am in no way expressing nationalist sentiment here. It is making the simple point that my understanding of myself, my cultural self, has a national form - which is not a value judgement, but a matter of fact.)

Is there any way that the Biennale can contribute to the process of developing an understanding of our cultural situation? Doesn't it set that process back ten years, into the myopic thinking of the sixties?

The structure of the Biennale is the formula for always producing 'second class' artists. Do we simply want to become better second-class artists, or do we have the guts (and collective solidarity) to reject that bullshit altogether?

To reject it we have to relate to each other in ways other than those presupposed by events like the Biennale. We have to value our experiences over those abstracted experiences with which we are constantly encouraged to identify. We have to learn to express our experiences in terms of the real conditions in which they occur. That is, we have to acknowledge the actual circumstances and contradictions which our experiences embody, on both a personal and a social level. (Plainly this is not possible within the Biennale, a context which presupposes its own 'transcendence' of such experiences.) There are no individual solutions which will overcome this problem. The only effective way of confronting it is collectively. By demonstrating our solidarity with each other, we do have the power to change the thinking about the Biennale, and also change the attitudes of the mushrooming art bureaucracy in Australia before it is too late.

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'Correggio Jones' was the painter in a poem of the same name by Victor Daley, written about the 1890s. The opening and final stanzas are:

*Correggio Jones an artist was  
Of pure Australian race,  
But native subjects scorned because  
They were too commonplace...*

*He yet is painting at full bat -  
You'll say, if him you see.  
"His body dwells on Gander Flat,  
His soul's in Italy.*

Ian Burn, Sydney

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

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