

Meeting at Old Marist Bros. School, Darlinghurst 2/3/79

The purpose of the meeting was:

- (a) to inform interested persons about the controversy over the coming Biennale and discuss issues raised in the "White Elephant Or Red Herring" broadsheet
- (b) to forward material discussed and suggestions made as contribution to the proposed publication,

The meeting lasted 2.5 hours

- S.J. I don't think the "White Elephant or Red Herring" newssheet is an adequate statement of the anti-Biennale's point of view. It's totally inadequate – all it does is raise issues of contention, it doesn't come out at all and make any sort of statement about what is really felt – it assumes that everybody knows and nobody does, because no information got out.
- T.R. Stephen is saying that "White Elephant or Red Herring" makes gross assumptions about the level of information that people have had prior to it and I tend to agree.
- S.J. Well, that's why this meeting is being held – this meeting demonstrates very adequately that fact. The Follies and the Radio Ozone got information out, but that's about all there's been; there's been no other discussion, no public discussion, no public broadcast. I recognise that all those people are hard to get to and so the argument has come up out of a vacuum.

That Sandra McGrath article was in one sense very damning because although she put the thing sort of straight, but leaning towards the anti-Biennale (at least that's the way most people read it), she didn't put the point into the paper about why the Biennale should be a community-based participatory activity without all this incredible cultural cringe towards overseas work.

We get a massive amount of overseas input, most of it I suspect is paid for by the V.A.B., although they would probably deny that. They'll say only 1/3 of their money goes to bringing out people from overseas.

- D.I. Not all people from overseas get paid. e.g. the Holland government pays for all their artists to go overseas.

- J.L. This takes us back to the basic reason for the Biennale.

I think there are a lot of people (and I've heard arguments here to that effect) who want to see overseas work, and that hadn't come across in the proposition of the anti-Biennale, which seemed to be that the Biennale should not be a representation of overseas work.

- T.R. The original problem was to ascertain what Australian artists require, what their needs are. Certainly people do want contact, but they want to elect the contact they feel is most relevant to them and the people they are working with, so that it's not an elitist cultural arbitrator deciding what we need. It's not a case against the fact that there are interesting things happening elsewhere in the world.

- J.L. What I'm asking is: we know how many people signed that petition, and there are the artists in Melbourne who are putting forward these propositions, but to what extent has this information infiltrated. It doesn't seem very far

So how much local support does this movement have? No one here except say Wayne and me, had even heard of any of this until ten days ago when we decided to hold this meeting. So what percentage of Australian artists are you actually representing? If you ask a lot of people, they want to see this overseas stuff in boxes; it seems that the anti-Biennale influence hasn't got very far.

- T.R. There's one thing about the way art works – that is, it seems to work through prolonged contact. I mean you don't learn about art by just looking at art, it's a matter of lifestyle – you have to be involved. So that's the main argument against the Biennale simply acting as a showcase.
- J.L. I'm just putting forward an argument that I know people have put to me over the last week, and it's a question that has to be answered for a lot of people.
- T.R. Again I can only say that the objection is not against contact with overseas artists at all, it's just the matter of the system of arriving at an exhibition. We base it on the hopes that the community is a thinking community that has real statements to say as far as (a) the organisation and (b) the criticism of the Biennale. Despite the noted inadequacies of this pamphlet the intention of it was to stimulate discussion and response in the hope that response would be sufficient to get something like a mosaic of opinion.
- D.I. And that opinion – where will it go? Just onto a piece of paper? Or is there going to be some real activity or demonstration? What is going to happen after we have collected a mosaic of ideas?
- J.S. Well, something will come out of it.
- D.I. Like what? It will all finish on the paper.
- T.R. Hopefully not.
- J.S. Every organised upstart has to begin on print, how else do you communicate?
- T.R. Exactly.
- J.S. So it has to begin with some kind of publication.
- D.I. Unless all these groups get together collectively and make some action, an art demonstration...
- J.S. Who would be the target of this demonstration?
- D.I. The committee of the Biennale.
- J.L. That can only come about when the people understand what they are demonstrating about, which is the reason we are having this meeting.
- D.I. I thought that the people that have been involved a couple of times already would have organised demands, put them on paper and organised real action to accompany this piece of paper, i.e. art demonstration, not art march, but art demonstration.
- J.S., You mean walking the streets with banners?
- D.I. Absolutely – like the ABC, with placards. We can do the same thing, sit-down strikes, insisting on demands being met.
- J.S., I think that a street demonstration would just become a joke..
- J.L. Half the people would have no idea what we were demonstrating about.
- D.I. In New York, a demonstration took over the Museum of Modern Art, you know that, and they changed many things after that.
- J.S. But a meeting achieves the same purpose if not more.
- D.I. No

J.S. You can have positive discussion and you can come to some conclusion. What do you do in a demonstration?

50% Female Representation

J.L. May I just return to one point? Despite whatever action we decide on, I still think that there is a lot of information that we should be able to get from this meeting, and that is not happening.

Over the last few days a lot of questions have been raised not the least mentioned has been the issue about the 50% of women, which when boiled down means that 25% of the Biennale is 25% Australian women, and a lot of people have raised their heads and said "What?"

A lot of folk around here have reacted just in that manner which indicated to me that the issue is probably not properly understood. Isn't that a rather silly stipulation to be making at this point, they ask.

S.J. In isolation, it is a very silly stipulation; it just comes back to the basis of the general argument over participation, what has been the situation of women in art over the last 2,000 years or whatever, and there have been very, very, few Ð the major art stable is men – why?

LS. Because more men went qualified.

S.J. I'm not trying to raise the question to be answered; I'm raising it to try to get some kind of perspective. I don't need the answer, I know the answer.

T.R. It wasn't so long no that woman didn't have the vote, because they weren't 'competent' to think about such issues.

J.S.. On the other hand, what if there aren't enough qualified women?

S.J. What is this qualification thing? Why do people have to be qualified? I'm sure there are more than 50% of women participating in the business of art that me more than qualified.

T.R. A few observations I've heard in recent months are that a lot of the most interesting work that is going on in Sydney and presumably elsewhere is being done by women, and it's taking art in new directions. Virginia Coventry would probably be a good example of someone who is doing very interesting explorations.

The usual argument people come up with is something like – art isn't based on statistics like 50-50, it's based on something else.

Standards

S.J. If you reintroduce "qualifications" you reduce the whole thing back to where they want it. Qualifications are bullshit.

J.L. Which brings me to try to remember something someone raised the other day – the emphasis on community participation – that this stipulation held a lot of danger in terms of again looking at the matter of qualifications, standards etc.

J.S. I don't mean academic qualifications For Christ's sake, if there is no sort of standard what is all this art business about?

S.J. But it's qualifications that Nick Waterlow and the others use to discredit your work in the Biennale, your work is just too shithouse. That is the line they'll use if you allow them to use the concept of qualification.

J.S. Well, obviously we have to use another word – standard.

- S.J. No drop it. Forget the concept altogether of qualification or standard because they are used totally arbitrarily by an art establishment to make sure that certain types of work don't get established.
- J.S. Well, I think it is a total waste of time to listen to a whole lot of mumbo-jumbo that has nothing to do with art, because that is what you get in the long run if you don't draw the line somewhere.
- S.J. That is your personal judgment to which you are entitled completely, but for Christ's sake, keep it to yourself. My personal judgment is going to be quite different from everybody else's, as is yours.

What the whole argument is about is trying to bring art out of an elitist condition to a condition where it is accessible to the largest possible number of people. Now if you want to argue with that, then join the Biennale committee. It's not the line that the people who are taking an anti-Biennale stance are on about. They are trying to promote a community awareness and an accessibility towards art and not a strictly elitist awareness of what art is.

- J.S. Well then, what is art about?
- S.J. That's exactly what I'm pointing out. It's about some kind of medium that people can get to, to express various situations that are not usually verbally expressible, and certainly non-media expressible – T.V. etc – and make them accessible to as large a range of people as possible. The situation hopefully becomes a situation where people are not confused and bamboozled by the private language of an which you have to become qualified to read, but where there is a very public and accessible language of art that everybody has access to.
- J.S. Well, then it's some such thing, but it's not art anymore. Is art a democratic concept or is it elitist? Which is it?
- S.J. I don't care to answer that at this point.
- J.S. But you have to.
- S.J. Well, democracy as a concept doesn't exist in the first place, and I don't think we know what we mean when we use the word. We use that word to imply something which is predicated on a slave state, and the slave state still exists. People who work for General Motors to get enough money to buy their refrigerators and their colour TV and have to keep working are slaves, whether they are paid \$200 or nothing.
- J.S. That is an ideological statement.
- S.J. Yes, of course, it's an ideological statement – we can't do anything without being ideological. There's no such thing as a non-political framework. A non-political framework is extremely political, in fact it is extremely right wing. You cannot take part in social life without being political.
- J.S. Yes, I agree.

Selection

- S.J. How do you select a survey of international work to come here? It's difficult but if they have managed to select one to come here now by using a certain set of criteria, then I'm sure we could manage to set up another set of criteria.
- T.R. Are you still concerned about the loss of international contact?
- J.L. No, I was just trying to follow a logical consequence of what Stephen was saying. If you eliminate any criteria of quality, with thousands of artists overseas to choose from then there has to be some criteria of selection?

T.R. It would hopefully be generated by the artists rather than some bureaucratic elite.

S.J. One has to make selections and you've got to have criteria to make them if you've got limited resources. The point is – who is setting up the criteria in the first place? At the moment with the Biennale, it is 4 or 5 people, maybe only one in fact, and the criteria chosen have taken effectively no notice whatsoever of all the working papers towards criteria produced by the meeting held since the end of the last Biennale and the beginning of this year.

J.L. When approached about these things, what do people like Nick Waterlow do? How do they answer?

T.R. As far as correspondence goes it tends not to get answered. In conversations nothing is formal, it's all informal, so that is really an act of evasion.

Consensus

J.S. Let's forget all about this jazz and concentrate on something positive – how do we get rid of the committee? Or, at least influence them?

S.J. No, at this time we are only interested in bringing people's understanding to some kind of level where there is at least some consensus on the types of things that we would like the committee to consider.

J.L. And people need to be able to clarify in their minds these kinds of things before they can take any action with confidence.

I.F. What we are involved in is a power struggle, we should be suggesting some kind of action, not just talk about it. We have got to get to a stage that everybody understands and is basically agreeing to first.

D.I. Do that after the demonstration, not now.

M.K. Is this information going to lead to some kind of manifesto? Some kind of consensus?

J.S. A collective point of view?

S.J. Of course there will always be individual differences – the whole thing wouldn't work if there weren't. But when the press or the Biennale committee confront you, and most important the public, we need consolidation, particularly if we are to hold an effective demonstration – last Biennale outside the Art Gallery of New South Wales we had the most fabulous and successful demonstration.

T.R. What is happening now as compared to what was brought up previously is quite significant – an examination of the actual structures.

I.F. They obviously haven't gone around and looked for alternative points of view.

J.S. Then why not hold an anti-Biennale exhibition, that would be a most effective way of protesting.

T.R. I differ from Stephen's point of view – I don't think in terms of 'us' and 'them' – we are all people and there are small conflicts and this conflict seems to be major because of the flow of a lot of capital.

If you looked over the V.A.B, there is a sympathy with the principles suggested, but probably someone worried about the effectiveness – because if you have a totalitarian government that you trust, then it's more effectual.

But with Transfield – they are coming in on it for prestige and they are getting a lot out of it for very little money.

So in that case it's more a matter of education, letting them know we are here, that we think, live and we are talking about what they are doing and that not everybody necessarily agrees with his self-image.

Earlier Meetings

- D.I. I was at two of them & demands were made, we now have 50% women – what now?
- T.R. Most of them are prepared to co-operate. If no-one had shown any interest nothing would have happened, so the discussions and the communication of ideas are effective; and using the media, of course.
- D.I. What about official student representation, as elsewhere in the world?
- T.R. None. There should be, of course.
- J.L. Nick Waterlow came to college (AMCAE) at the end of last year inquiring about it, but it was outside the Biennale; he was not very encouraging about our work, at least not positive in feedback, and was really asking for voluntary participation.
- I.F. Do you think the Biennale committee would be open to discussion on these issues? Would they be prepared to give one day to the public in the Art Gallery to discuss the Biennale and to consider things to improve it for the next one?
- T.R. Actually that happened after the last Biennale, and, amazingly enough, Tomaso Trini, an Italian critic, involved with a lot of the organisation of the overseas Biennales made most of the same criticisms that we are. Why not find a more open system more relevant to Australian society? That's all down on tape.
- K.S. What are we going to do about alternative activities and alternative venues during the Biennale? Shouldn't we carry on despite the hassles? Recognising the dangers inherent in this & apparent support to the present organisation and elitism etc. – yet also recognising our need to participate on some other level ...
- T.R. I think that one of the best things for this venue is to inform student groups that will be in Sydney that, if they would like to present documentation of their work and get to know what is going on with other groups in the country, there is a venue available (aside from the venue at the Old Marist Bros. School, Darlinghurst).
- D.I. I am against accompanying exhibitions, they should be alternative.
- J.L. The more information you can offer, the more support you are going to get.
- M.K. A whisper turns into a shout.

Action

- T.R. I feel we should not be trying to counter the Biennale which would be an impossible task at this point; but that we should try to get the "Network" thing happening in a real sense during the Biennale and that this would be incredibly positive, people would be put in contact and there would be discussion.
- I.F. How about discussion of the credibility of what's going on, in the actual space where it is going on? Surely they should give space to a public forum.

- T.R. It's important to use the Art Gallery of NewSouth Wales, the core of the exhibition, for the forum. You could, seeing as it is a public space, hold a forum there legally but without permission, get people together at a given time and discuss. What are the laws about holding public meetings in public places?
- J.S. There are no laws but you have to get permission, but I don't see why the director wouldn't give permission – he'd love it, after all, it would be a public response, of a kind.
- I.F. Maybe we could just roll along until they threw us out, and get a press conference as well.
- J.S. . Ask permission, then if they say no, do it anyway.
- D.I. Also I mentioned about sacrificing our art works as a finale to a demonstration – public burning of works just like Joan of Arc was burnt.
- LL. I'd like to know what overseas artists were put up for consideration to the committee by your group and ...
- T.R. It didn't get that far.
- L.L. After this one, will there be artists working to say "we'd like to see this, this, and this artist come here" and actually make a positive contribution?

The only person I've heard of that people got upset about was Glusberg from Argentina. Why didn't that get any further? If people showed much more enthusiasm about wanting to see someone, wouldn't we stand some chance of getting a result?

- T.R. Yes. The problem was that we were trying to get our principle accepted on a formal level. What we wanted was the O.K. to do the research, i.e. who is doing what, where, how it would fit together, and then have, on the other side, people who have the organisational abilities to work with us and find out what was practical.

But the principles we laid out were ignored, and the idea of having artist representatives on the committee to liaise with the artist community at large was ignored. You have only to look through the proposals.

- J.L. I've got some proposals that have come out of this discussion this morning:
1. A forum to be held on the premises of the Art Gallery.
 2. A demonstration to be held at the end to be privately organised.
 3. That we continue to discuss and work along the lines of alternative venues.
 - 4, Lyn to peruse the history of Terry's file of proposals.
 5. Collect the proposals, put them on paper, and exhibit them, during and/or after the Biennale.
 6. Dragan's proposal for a world Biennale – representation by all countries.

(Sydney)

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Source: Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring? Comments from the Art Community (SRC, Alexander Mackie C.A.E., Sydney 1979)

