

Sydney College of the Arts Meeting, March 28th, 1979

"BY CHOOSING THE PEOPLE YOU DETERMINE THE WHOLE THING OF THE BIENNALE."

This meeting was held on March 28th at the Sydney College of the Arts to find out how much people knew about the Sydney Biennale. We discovered that we didn't Have enough information on the mechanics of this supposedly significant show. Why, we asked, are students the last to know?

The meeting ran for two hours and we edited the following transcript of the discussion. It collects what we know and don't know and what we need to know . . .

A Pecking Order?

R.B. The pecking order is the order – looking at the 1976 Biennale program, the kind of information given about each artist is a list of solo exhibitions or group exhibitions and whether they've participated in another Biennale. So of three columns of information about the artists, two are just their credentials. I found that very few of the artists had a short list – and they all started about the mid-60's.

N.L. Do you think that this format – i.e. the statement of pedigree – determines the sort of artists who get asked? And if that's the only kind of artists who gets asked – what hope have we of ever seeing a different kind of list which is community-based – if that is a viable alternative for a Biennale?

P.C. But there seems to be quite a large emphasis this year on community art. Was that introduced after the fact, or by the committee?

N.L. Strip the last Biennale the opinion of those who were concerned was that the Biennale-type exhibition was too restricted to a certain kind of art and a certain kind of audience and that the Biennale should direct itself towards a much greater community orientation. But what's happened is that the audience this time is as narrow, as it was last time.

P.C. But they have gone to the trouble to find alternative venues – and those alternative venues mean that people will come into contact with the Biennale who wouldn't normally go to the Art Gallery. There's a large vacant block at the end of George St. and there's going to be a performance there. There's also going to be a stall by someone (I forget his name) that is going to move around the city, and there's the Sculpture Centre which is really into the more established art-world anyway ...

A.S. Do you think they've really alternative venues? They've got strings connecting them to the Art Gallery . .

Blacktown

A.S. Do you think they'd make different types of work if they went to Blacktown?

Some: Oh yes, yes ...

N.L. I don't. Take Mildura as an example. You don't send art to Mildura that you think will appeal to the people of Mildura. You send art that you think will appeal to the people who visit Mildura. I would guess artists would produce the same work – they'd just pack it up in a box and send it to Blacktown.

P.L. I don't think they'd ever send art to Blacktown anyway.

N.L. If the Biennale did exhibit at Blacktown, would it be appropriate? Would Biennale-type art which "confronts" the public on George St. go down in Blacktown – it might actually be taken down ... they would have to have an enormous publicity machine for it to be popular there ...

R.B. Don't forget that a lot of people from Blacktown walk down George St, at lunchhour.

R.B. The selection seems to be the main crux of the problem. Who is in it? By choosing the people you determine the whole thing of the Biennale. It's no good saying you get the same people that are in the Biennale now and put it on at Blacktown because that's going to do fuck all for Blacktown.

S.W. So what do we do? Select a group of unknown artists or something?

R.B. But is that going to be any better or different really?

Art College Justification?

S.M. We are talking about things like "the audience" and who it is directed to as if there is an "us and them" situation and as if there's a lot of spoon-feeding going on. Is that really how we treat each other?

N.L. Are you proposing that we don't do that?

S.M. Yes, I am and I don't think we should. I don't think that artists have anything to say to people to change their lives I think the most socially useful thing an artist can say to its audience is "Go make your own fucking art" That would really subvert the entire role of these institutions.

M.B. How can you make that kind of statement? Do you stop having Biennale-type exhibitions and start running community workshopse where the people can learn traditional skills – or –

S.M. I don't know – if we can only put our training to the test in the institutions then we are not getting at the real heart of what has become a political problem that operates on the psychological level too.

M.B. But we are meant to pretend that there are "the masses" – people who don't make art. Which is why we are here and our full time employment is to make art.

A Working Wage?

E.I.. Are they going to press for an artist's working wage?

P.L. It's easier to fix a wage for say – actors – so much an hour – but what's an artist going to produce?

R.B. At the moment it's more a problem of fixing values for the commodities artists produce and that's where this process (the catalogue) comes in ... like, their work is valued on how many exhibitions they've had and what their general credibility rating is – so it would be an incredible problem to try and work out the pay artists should get.

Justification – Values In Society?

E.I. Is having a Biennale the justification by artists for what they are doing? They present the public with a cross-section of art work so the public knows what's going on and they thereby justify what they are doing in terms of its value in society. The usual reaction of people in the street – I mean non-art type people is "I don't understand it! Bullshit! It's worthless!" Then the Biennale is saying its trying to direct itself to those sorts of people, as well is every other sort of person – is it just trying to justify the existence of an art community?

M.B. You mean the spending of public money in the art community?

P.F. Or education?

N.L. Well is it education? What is it? Are we educating "the masses" by putting on a Biennale?

M.B. She meant education in terms of us – spending money on us – does the Biennale keep this institution going?

If We Were The Committee

M.B. If we were to run the Sydney Biennale do we go to Blacktown or Liverpool and deal with the specific problem in that place or different places throughout Sydney. So if we were the committee and we weren't just people who had assumed control of the Biennale but were representative of sections of the community, how would we resolve the problem of what to do with it as an institution?

R.B. If we approach that as two parts of one question – like first of all that's assuming that there is going to be a Biennale, do we first of all think that having a Biennale is a good idea?

M.B. I think it is because it can be a positive activity, it can be directional, it can be educational. And I think that it has potential in the fact that a group of people can be given money in order to carry out some public activity, supposedly a public activity.

R.B. I agree that the Biennale is a good idea. But then the question we come to is the selection and who is going to participate.

A.S. Yes, what about all those people with those mile-long lists of exhibitors that they've had and established themselves as being "artists"?

M.B. No, you still have the artists but you're taking them into another situation – a learning situation for the artists as well as the public.

A.S. Well the issue you're raising then is surely the fact that they're having it in the art-world area at all.

Distribution Determines Production

S.M. All this meeting has been concentrating on is the distribution and promotion of the artworks after they've all been made. That's what we are talking about now. I don't think people understand much until they see how and why a work gets made. Everyone's going from the other end – about where it's being distributed. All we've concentrated on is after the event – how it is dealt with out in society, in the gallery which is still a competitive system. It doesn't seem to me to be a very healthy way to treat art.

And Women?

M.B. This is a quote from an article in LIP by Tom McCulloch, the director of the last Biennale–

“... I certainly agree that a lot of women artists produce work that is quite different from men – but I see a lot of delicate, feminine work coming from men artists. In the sense of delicacy which we associate with that of femininity and I see a lot of very robust, strong art coming from female artists. . . .”

I find that whole attitude so conservative. I can't believe it – so paternalistic – that we should classify women's art as "delicate".

P.C. Don't you think asking for equal representation is itself being patronizing by whoever asks for it? That is, if only some women asked for it

P.F. Yes, I agree. I think it's rather patronising that they have to have 50% female representation of works exhibited. I think it more important to have 50% female representation on the selection committee. I think a work of art should stand on its own, regardless of sex, race or creed.

K.M. I don't think you can say that's patronizing – because if that issue hadn't been brought up at all women would have probably been precluded to a greater extent – which is worse than maybe putting a quota on it – At least now women have an equal say.

M.B. But they're still being chosen in terms of the selection committee as it exists – all men but one – they obviously have a leaning towards a certain type of art.

S.W. I don't think it really matters what sex the artist is – I don't even know what sort of prejudice is involved. But just the selection of artists – I don't see how it works.

Could We Demand A Different Committee?

R.B. Do you know how long the ban, or whatever it is, on artists who have already shown in the Biennale lasts before they can appear in the Biennale again?

N.L. Maybe the ban should be perpetual ... Why do you ask the question? Are you worried about them all coming round again?

R.B. I knew there was a one time ban – that's at least one of the saving graces, that you won't see the same people the following year. If the organisation of the Biennale perpetuates a certain kind of work, as Sharron says, at the level of production, would it make much difference if you ban one set of artists for one year? Perhaps we should also ban the committee: Anyone who has been on it one year – shouldn't be on it the next time round – why don't they extend that rule for themselves?

S.W. I think that's a really good idea ... what's good for the goose is good for the gander.

Funding & Etc?

M.B. Is it still being funded by the V.A.B. and the International program of the Australia Council? And some other overseas money?

P.L. Some of the foreign artists are getting subsidies from their own government.

S.W. So the committee is made up of the people who put up the money.

M.B. But it's really public money that's being put up – so it's not really their money that's being put up – but they are in charge of it.

R.B.. How is the money spent on the artists? If they make objects who owns the objects or are they just being paid a fee to come out here and present something which they don't have to sell – or – how does that operate?

N.L. If you are a 'name' artist you obviously have a bargaining position for more money, more expenses, more space – the lot.

P.L. I think that one of the questions that should be asked is whether the committee or the whole Biennale should have a responsibility to the public because they are using public funds. That's a really important question. They are getting \$90,000 and that's public money. Are the public getting value for their money?

R.B. So is this! (pointing) This college is public money.

P.L. I know. See everyone here tries to divorce themselves from society and all that does is further promote that elitism. This College is elitist, this Biennale is elitist and it's just perpetuating itself further and further. By thinking that we are some kind of intelligentsia who are the only people who can create art. And by creating art that is esoteric then most people don't understand it and it further perpetuates that whole story.

M.B. I think that it is important that it is public money that's being spent on the Biennale which is sort of directed to people like us, a really small audience. If it was private money, it wouldn't make it any better, but would be a bit more justifiable.

N.L. In this case private money controls public money.

R.B. Yeah, that's one thing I'm fairly incensed about is the fact that if they're putting in one-quarter of the money they seem to have a lot more than one quarter of the influence.

P.L. They're investing for a reason.

Rick Bolzan, Margaret Bowe, Peter Callas, Philippa Fincher,, Eugene Intas, Marianne Kristensen,, Peta Lawson, Nigel Lendon, Sharron Mackison, Sue Manigan, Kathy Marmor, Alan Spackman, Sally Wade.

Source: Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring? Comments from the Art Community (SRC, Alexander Mackie C.A.E., Sydney 1979) p30-33