



beauty of distance

songs of survival in a precarious age

Situated in the heart of Sydney, in a land that has traditionally regarded distance as a disadvantage, the 17th Biennale of Sydney will celebrate the beauty of distance. We are all the same, yet different and it is our differences that make us—according to the circumstances—beautiful, terrifying, attractive, boring, sexy, unsettling, fascinating, challenging, funny, stimulating, horrific or even many of these at once.¹

Biennale of Sydney Artistic Director David Elliott is a curator, writer, broadcaster and museum director, whose main interests concern contemporary art, Russian avant-garde and the visual cultures of central and eastern Europe, Asia and the non-Western world from the late nineteenth-century. Beginning in the early 1980s, he formulated a series of pioneering exhibitions in one of the first programs to integrate non-Western culture with contemporary art. He has published a large number of books, articles and catalogues on these subjects and has curated many exhibitions. He has also written extensively about the present-day role and function of museums and contemporary art. David Elliott was Director of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, England from 1976-96, Director of Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Sweden from 1996-2001, the founding Director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, Japan from 2001-06 and in 2007 the first Director of Istanbul Modern, Turkey. Recent exhibitions he has conceived or worked on include *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (2004); *Follow Me! Chinese Art at the Threshold of the New Millennium* (2005); *Tokyo-Berlin/Berlin-Tokyo* (2005); *From Ottoman Empire to Turkish Republic* (2007); and *Time Present, Time Past: Highlights from 20 Years of the International Istanbul Biennial* (2007).



Left: Paul McCarthy, *Santa Butt Plug*, 2007
Photo courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, Zurich/London
Above: David Elliott
Page 177: Isaac Julien, *Fantome Créole Series (Places des Cinéastes after Bodys Isek Kingelez)*, 2005
Photo courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London

BROADSHEET: *In the initial published statements regarding the Biennale of Sydney, Australia is referred to as “a land that has traditionally regarded distance as a disadvantage”. The text continues in part as an apparent exhortation to embrace distance—the beauty of distance—although also asking the question “why should distance be good or beautiful?” Is this perception of the disadvantage of distance one that you’ve encountered in your work to date within Australia? Is there a degree to which it might also be a perception projected upon a so-called “Australian condition” from the outside? Given shifts in, or multiplication of centres or significant ‘elsewheres’, is it appropriate to ask again, as is done relentlessly in Australia, distance from where (from what, from whom)?*

DAVID ELLIOTT: Ah, the title... on one level I am working with a common figure of speech, “the beauty of...”. I like this for its demotic quality as well as for its obvious reference to Beauty, one of the cornerstones of Western aesthetics, a discourse which is still of not malign influence in a so-called globalised world. All my exhibition work and writing has focused on the constant interplay between the abstractions of art and life experience, so this kind of word and idea play feels right for a title which is open ended but, at the same time, quite specific.

In a similar way “distance” refers to the idea of mental, physical and geographical positioning and the spaces between different points, perspectives, or views. It also comments directly on the condition of both art and criticism as activities. In the case of art, the distance between what the artist produces and the experiences that, at different levels, feed into it is what we call aesthetics and within this are a multitude of ideas about what can be described as “quality”. Perhaps “quality” is not synonymous with “beauty” but if it is ‘good’, it may be related to it. On the other hand, some ideas of beauty are just horrible, but others can be attractive, horrific, or even sublime. A more contemporary term could be “cultural value”, but this sounds a bit dull and I prefer the word “beauty” as defined by the different kinds of work that will be shown.

In the case of criticism it is very difficult to be any good without a certain constructive professional distance. Sadly, what we often read is advocacy, propaganda or, going in the other direction, a pretext for the same old rant dressed up in new clothing.

With regard to Australia “distance” has a certain redolence hardly invented by me, but it is another element with which I am working. Working and living in different cultures helps you understand that there are always many equally valid perspectives on any issue, something I was beginning to understand even before I left the UK. When I chose the title I did not know about Geoffrey Blainey’s book *Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia’s History* (1966). Subsequently, as a popular expression, “tyranny of distance” has become a kind of cultural mantra. To take only two recent examples, last year it was the title of a solo exhibition by Jonathan Jones at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation and currently the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra is premiering a work of the same title by Brenton Broadstock. You could say that I am turning this on its head. Of course I am aware of the colonial past and its still pernicious heritage—and this is not confined to Australia—but as the Western Enlightenment project crumbles and we try to apprehend what kind of world is growing in its place, new opportunities and possibilities for looking at, experiencing and understanding open up. Colonial melancholy—the sense of being banished or cut off from the centre—now seems out of place and time. Distance may be a tool, even a privilege, rather than an imposition. We have to make our own centres. This is one of the struggles—how do we do this and with whom?

BROADSHEET: *You claim distance as a necessary condition for art—if Australia has a particular familiarity with the experience of distance does this manifest, in your view, in any particular advantages for practice, its contexts and reception in Australia?*

DAVID ELLIOTT: I think that I may have already answered this but, more generally, would like to add that as Australia is a relatively new country, slowly emerging from the colonial yoke, but with a vigorous and diverse pattern of immigration, I think that many Australians may have less baggage than those who have grown up in the old world. But it is very early days. The Campaign against World Poverty and Debt has been one of very few positive achievements of the current Labour Government in the UK but this is very much on the back burner now. I wish you better success.

BROADSHEET: *“Beauty” has made various overt appearances in the conceptual framing of major exhibitions and in associated discourse over the past decade or so—the major survey Regarding Beauty at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC, at the turn of the century being a particular case in point. In many such instances the proffering of beauty as the key condition and determining frame for art has been undertaken in the particular context of a professed rearticulation of modernity’s resonances in the present. So two sets of questions.*

First, the binding of distance and beauty appears to replace the concept of ‘critical distance’ so prevalent in distance discourses through the 1980s and 1990s. Does this binding of distance and beauty suggest an intimacy of identification or contact—our loss of self in beauty perhaps or desire to touch, to be one with the beautiful—that displaces or relegates the reflective capacity of detachment inferred by ‘critical distance’? And whatever the answer may be here, how is that made apparent or produced within the areas of practice and work that you are looking to with this Biennale?

DAVID ELLIOTT: I don’t think that experience of an art work and criticism of it are synonymous, or that one should replace another. Aesthetic experience may be transcendent, but not necessarily so, but if the viewer has to intellectualise everything before he or she can really experience, we not only devalue the speed of our synapses and intelligence, but also the whole emotional, visceral, even optical, impact of art. The work must come first and then the critique. Obviously I have gone through this process in all the art I have chosen for the *Biennale*. I think that it stands up both in terms of experience and critique (ie., my critique of my experience of knowing the work). Others might not agree but that’s fine by me.

BROADSHEET: *Second, a number of recent Biennales of Sydney have engaged quite overtly with a rethinking of modernity and modernism after the ‘modern century’—whether the fantastical projections of the modern subconscious (2002); the reason/emotion dialectic (2004); modernity’s global outfalls (2006); or modernity’s revolutionary fervour (and subjection to eternal return, 2008). How consciously does your project in development engage with or depart from these precedents? Are there different ‘modernities’ being articulated in the different clusters for your project (‘First Peoples and Fourth Worlds’, ‘From the Panopticon to the Wunderkammer’, ‘Of Gods and Ghosts’, ‘A Hard Rain’, ‘The Trickster’)? If so, how and to what effect? Is there any reflection of cultural or geographical difference taking place here?*

DAVID ELLIOTT: I am aware of previous *Biennales* and have seen three of them, but what they have or have not ‘covered’ has not preyed on my mind. I have tried to make an exhibition about this time—no historical works—using the harbour area of Sydney, an iconic modern city and the site of the first encounters with the British explorers, as a stage. There are certainly legacies of modernity that have to be taken into account, and structures of power that have to be related to this, but I am interested in what it means to be creating art now. You could say that this approach promotes an idea of vernacular or demotic contemporaneity as is clear from the metaphor of folk music and tradition that touches on some of the ‘hub ideas’ you mention. For me this has been a helpful way of undermining the supremacy of ‘modern’ contemporary art and giving some air for work which, by force of circumstance, has been previously marginalised or discounted by modernity. There will be no modern hierarchies.

BROADSHEET: *Throughout the past decade, or at least since documenta XI, the model of collectively organised biennales and similar events has become more prevalent, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. In fact, the multiple curator biennale seems to be the norm in this part of the world rather than the exception, in contrast to the single curator, auteur model popular elsewhere. Since 2004 however, the Biennale of Sydney seems to have made a conscious decision to appoint an individual in the role of artistic director and curator around whom its publicity has been focused. Questions of policy in this regard should be directed at the Biennale itself rather than its current artistic director, but how do you feel about working in this way? And, given that Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, arguably the most overtly individual director of a recent Biennale of Sydney, established a network of “curatorial comrades” who functioned in one way or another as collaborators on her exhibition, are there any modes of collaboration that you might explore for this project?*

DAVID ELLIOTT: I have worked as an artistic director of and co-curated many exhibitions in the past, and have had to run large institutions at the same time, and I have always gained a lot from my collaborators. I have been talking, as always, to many friends and colleagues, and then there are many people whom I don’t know who have made suggestions. We are also collaborating in depth with the different venues of the *Biennale*. But the most significant collaboration is in the fluid performance space that can also act as a social or orientation centre in the daytime. Working with a Tokyo-based architecture practice and a local Sydney arts organisation, we are planning to create an experimental space combining art gallery, bar, meeting place, music venue and nightclub. The artists, musicians, performers, designers and writers that will be involved in this program will help maintain a resonant and constantly changing forum of creativity, the documentation of which will be streamed over the net or projected during the day-time hours.

We are also looking for synergies between the *Biennale* and other Sydney-based arts organisations, not just visual arts but also cross-disciplinary. We hope that these non-traditional collaborations will yield new creative fruit and foster a greater appreciation for the rich, vernacular and wide-ranging possibilities of contemporary art.

In the context of globalisation, the extension of copyright is becoming a serious brake on both collaborative creativity and the extension of knowledge. Paul McCarthy’s abhorrence of “Disneyisation” and what it represents will be clear from the work that is shown, but two English artists, Eileen Simpson and Ben White, who founded The Open Music Archive, are very much concerned with the whole area of remix and Creative Commons. They will, I hope, be working on aspects of this relating to the Harry Smith Archive as well as to the situation in Sydney.

BROADSHEET: *You attended the recent Artspace ‘Spaces of Art’ Conference in Sydney, in April 2009. Coincidentally, your exhibition concept for the Biennale, which was announced in June, ‘The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age’, uses two words—“distance” and “precarious”—that were among the concepts discussed at the conference. Isabell Lorey spoke about “precarity”, while Lee Weng Choy spoke about “distance”. While not asking you to explain what Lorey meant by her use of “precarity”, perhaps you could elaborate on what you mean by the concept?*

DAVID ELLIOTT: I am afraid that I did not have the opportunity to hear Isabell Lorey talk. By using the word “precarious” I am referring to the general world situation of unprecedented threats—conflict, famine, inequity, environmental despoliation and global warming.

BROADSHEET: *As for “distance”, in Lee Weng Choy’s presentation, he observed that biennales are often criticised for being prescriptive and repetitive. But he also argued that if biennales are too prescriptive, it’s not just because certain artists and practices are being privileged, repeated, reproduced and circulated. Rather, the prescription of the biennale, in its most profound sense, is how it naturalises a certain global perspective. The notion of the ‘global’ is commonly used to denote the empirical processes of globalisation. But according to Sanjay Krishan, rather than merely describe this region called ‘the global’, the concept constitutes and institutes a privileged perspective. And, following Krishnan, Lee argued for going beyond the critique of Eurocentrism—not by offering an alternative narrative, say, of an ascendant Asia—but by interrupting the elisions and closures of the global. Lee also argued that ‘the biennale’ is an exemplary form of bringing together for display a wide selection of global art and culture, but most exhibitions elide the great distances between the many locations represented. Yet the trouble with biennale criticism is that only in the rare occasion does it read its object with a thorough commitment to the multiplicities available in the exhibitions discussed. How often does one hear a reviewer lamenting that he or she has “seen it all before”. Whether or not such remarks are inaccurate, such rejections paradoxically only further consolidate the centrality of the global. They fail to adequately comprehend the possibilities of interrupting the global perspective. So, the question—do you buy this argument that it’s important to interrupt the global perspective, and how might your Biennale attempt to do it?*

DAVID ELLIOTT: I am making an exhibition specifically for Sydney that relates to the history of the sites, place and community but, importantly, also needs to stand up on the international stage. As Sydney/Australia are paradigms of colonial and postcolonial development and I have been looking, but not exclusively so, at a lot of new work in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific region, the *Biennale* should have a particular resonance that will also be comprehensible much further afield. Like Weng Choy, I am sceptical about capitalist globalisation that looks at the world purely as a ‘resource’ that can be owned and profited from, as well as a globalised art that reflects mainly the concerns of the art markets in New York or London. I am trying to put together an exhibition that, while being critically aware of this, comprehends and celebrates different kinds of aesthetic ‘goodness’—which, of course, is also about difference, distance and the multifaceted, sometimes horrific, faces of beauty.

Note

¹ David Elliott, <http://www.biennaleofsydney.com.au/bos17/bos17concept.htm>



PLACE DES CINEASTES

SO TRAC