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Introduction: The World and World-Making in Art

Caroline Turner and Michelle Antoinette

This special issue of Humanities Research offers a selection of papers presented at the international conference ‘The World and World-Making in Art: Connectivities and Differences’ held at The Australian National University (ANU) from 11–13 August 2011.\(^1\)

The conference inspired significant interest nationally and internationally and attracted scholars from the United States, Europe, Asia, the Pacific and South America. It formed part of the program organised by the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) at ANU under the overarching theme: ‘The World and World-Making in the Humanities and the Arts’ and complemented other conferences relating to the concept of ‘world-making’ in history and literature.\(^2\) We would like to extend our special thanks to the Head of the HRC, Dr Debjani Ganguly, who suggested we undertake a conference focussing on art and to our co-conveners Zara Stanhope and Jackie Menzies and to Leena Messina and Sharon Komidar for their assistance with both the conference and this special issue of Humanities Research. We also extend our thanks to Professor Paul Pickering

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\(^1\) Held as part of the Humanities Research Centre’s 2011 theme, ‘The World and World-Making in the Humanities and the Arts’, 11–13 August 2011. Co-convened by Caroline Turner, Michelle Antoinette, Zara Stanhope and Jacqueline Menzies. The conference included 56 papers and was attended by a capacity registration of over 130 delegates. There were a number of lead speakers including a number of artists: lead speakers (in order of presentation): Professor Patrick Flores (University of the Philippines), Professor Howard Morphy (Australian National University), Xu Hong (National Art Museum of China), Professor Marsha Meskimmon (Loughborough University, UK), Professor Pat Hoffie (Griffith University), Dr Charles Merewether (Institute of Contemporary Arts, Singapore), Professor Terry Smith (University of Pittsburgh, USA), Professor Jaynie Anderson (University of Melbourne), Dr Anthony Gardner (The Courtauld Institute of Art/ Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Arts, University of Oxford, UK), Tony Ellwood (Director, Queensland Art Gallery), Professor Jill Bennett (University of New South Wales), Lisa Reihana (Contemporary Artist + Tohunga a Toi, Unitec School Design and Visual Arts, Aotearoa/ New Zealand), Professor John Clark (University of Sydney), Mella Jaarsma (Artist and co-founder of Cemeti Art House and Indonesia Visual Art Archive, Indonesia).

\(^2\) The conference topic proved to be one which inspired significant response and an extremely high standard of papers. Speakers came from a variety of countries apart from Australia including the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, the Philippines, Brazil, Indonesia, China, the Netherlands and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The interest in the topic has resulted in several publications: this special issue focusing on contemporary art; papers by Professor Jaynie Anderson, artist Nusra Qureshi and a joint essay by Zara Stanhope and Michelle Antoinette published in the international journal World Art (Stanhope, Z. & Antoinette, M. 2012, ‘The World and World-Making in Art: Connectivities and Differences’, World Art, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 167–71); and a selection of papers related to Asia in Asian Connectivities (forthcoming), edited by two of the conveners (Antoinette and Turner). As well, individual authors have published a number of other papers in books and journals.
and the Editorial Board of *Humanities Research* for supporting our proposal to publish this special issue of the journal on the topic of ‘The World and World-Making in Art’.

Art historians have often resisted the term ‘world art’, although the concepts of world literature and world history have been more accepted in the humanities. One of the aims of our conference was to explore key issues in art discourses today, and also to address a central concept of the HRC’s theme in invoking an idea of world-making ‘beyond a cultural divide’ and instead speaking ‘to a domain of human connectivity’. We have selected papers which we believe present new and illuminating perspectives on the theme. As Zara Stanhope and Michelle Antoinette argue in their paper in the international journal *World Art*, ‘If the term “World Art” designates a flux—a multidisciplinary synthesis of history, critical analysis and practice—the notion of “world-making” describes processes involved in its generation.’

The conference was organised around four key sub-themes, which are represented in the selection of papers included in this volume:

2. Cosmopolitanism
3. Indigenous World-Making in Art
4. Crossing Borders: Artists, Institutions, Exhibitions and Audiences

While there were a number of very fine papers at the conference on the historical dimensions of ‘world-making’ in art, we have concentrated in this publication on what Terry Smith has called (in assessing the 1950s as prefiguring the roots of this change) the shift from ‘modern to contemporary’ in art. The papers selected for this special issue of *Humanities Research* under the four sub-themes focus on the critical period from the post-World War II era to the present. They also examine changing definitions of art in a time of increasing globalisation and of dramatic economic, cultural and geopolitical change.

As Stanhope and Antoinette state in their essay in *World Art*: ‘The conference proceeded from the acknowledged position that world-making in art is a platform for research aiming to challenge the hegemony of EuroAmericentric perspectives or to register alternative world views. Papers were invited to focus on the potential of connections and diversity within world-making, particularly cosmopolitanism, art practice, institutions, exhibitions and audiences crossing borders, and indigenous world-making.’ In seeking to explore a number of key

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issues in art discourses today and speaking to ‘a domain of human connectivity’ the conference ‘generated dialogue on subjects that went beyond geographic, state or cultural communities.’

A key issue of the conference that is reflected in the essays in this volume relates to the critical question in contemporary art discourses as to whether art and art history are now truly global. Our special issue begins with three essays from Smith, Marsha Meskimmon and Ian McLean, which together provide a broader theoretical context for discussion of the practical implications of present-day world-making in art. These essays are followed by a series of more detailed case studies by the other authors exploring the concept of ‘world-making’ in art in specific locations and contexts.

Smith’s insightful essay in this volume, ‘Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art: Planes and Connectivities’, takes up the critical concepts both of ‘connectivities’ and of ‘world-making’, and he nominates the latter as a topic at the core of contemporary art. As argued also in his influential 2011 book Contemporary Art: World Currents, Smith suggests that art now comes ‘from’ the whole world, from a growing accumulation of art-producing localities that no longer depend on the approval of a metropolitan centre and are, to an unprecedented degree, connected to each other in a multiplicity of ways, not least regionally and globally.’ In his recent writings, and in this essay, Smith identifies three key currents in art that taken together, he argues, ‘constitute the contemporary art of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries’. Smith’s position, central to the ideas expressed by many delegates at our conference, is that there has been a historical shift from EuroAmerican hegemony, geopolitically and economically, over the last 50 years, and recently at a more accelerated pace. ‘Geopolitical change has shifted the world picture from presumptions about the inevitability of modernisation and the universality of EuroAmerican values to recognition of the coexistence of difference, of disjunctive diversity, as characteristic of our contemporary condition.’

In defining the characteristics of contemporary art as different from art in the modern era he noted in his conference abstract that this change ‘occurred in different and distinctive ways in each cultural region, and in each art-producing locality within these regions. Cultural patterns with quite distinct temporalities co-exist, develop separately or together, connect then part ways. Precisely in its grasp of this experiential complexity, contemporary art is—perhaps for the first time in history—truly an art of the world. It comes from the whole

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4 Ibid., p.167.
world, and frequently tries to imagine the world as a differentiated yet inevitably connected whole. This is the definition of diversity: it is the key characteristic of contemporary art, as it is of contemporary life, in the world today.\textsuperscript{6}

As with Smith, the recent work undertaken by Meskimmon seeks to define the new cultural and aesthetic adjacencies in the world that are elicited by contemporary art’s global dimensions. In particular, Meskimmon is interested in critically examining new kinds of perspectives on ethics, aesthetics and subjectivity that are afforded by contemporary art’s cosmopolitan possibilities. Cosmopolitanism, one of the key sub-themes of our conference, is also the subject of Meskimmon’s important 2010 book, \textit{Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination}, in which she articulates contemporary notions of home and belonging through theorising a new ‘cosmopolitan imagination’ in art.\textsuperscript{7}

In her essay in this volume, ‘The Precarious Ecologies of Cosmopolitanism’, Meskimmon continues her explorations into the cosmopolitan imagination by focusing on the notion of ‘precarity’ in three contemporary art projects—\textit{After the Fact} by Catherine Bertola, \textit{A Tether of Time} by Joan Brassil, and \textit{Speak Rhymes with Beak} by Johanna Hällsten. In so doing, she likens the processes of world-making as akin to a ‘precarious ecology’, as ‘ongoing, mutable processes of relation …’. In turn, by positioning art as a world-making ecology, Meskimmon registers art as ‘a dynamic and sustainable system between subjects, objects and their environment.’

Significantly, through exploring these art projects, Meskimmon does not seek to offer them as mere reflections of cosmopolitan ideas, or as images of the cosmopolitan, but instead examines ‘how particular works (re)make worlds that open the possibility for the interpellation of cosmopolitan subject-positions and inter-relationships’ and argues the “possibilising” force of imagining and wonder as integral to this. She argues that art has the capacity to ‘interrupt our dulled continuity by bringing us to our senses and connecting us to change and opening us to difference’, and she suggests that ‘world-making in art is one of the ways in which we might instantiate the wondrous and precarious ecologies that enable us to glimpse the potential of the cosmopolitan imagination to “open the fabric of the ordinary and change it forever”.’

Mclean suggests in his essay, ‘Contemporaneous Traditions: The World in Indigenous Art/Indigenous Art in the World’ that ‘The widespread incomprehension of art historians and critics before Indigenous contemporary art remains a feature of art-world discourse’. McLean’s cogent analysis of the


elusive concepts of multiculturalism and of Indigeneity and the new narrative of ‘multiple modernities’ in the context of globalisation provides significant insights into the ways Indigenous art is accommodated into contemporary art discourses. He writes that: ‘From about 1990 global capital began delivering a completely deterritorialised contemporary art practice. Even Indigenous art, previously considered a primitive artifact of pre-modern times, was claimed (by a few) for contemporary art’. As he goes on to say ‘While Indigenous artists working in Western-derived styles have been readily accepted into contemporary art-world discourse—their art meets the condition of global modernity—those working with traditional styles and subjects have not. Nevertheless the latter have had a profound impact on the global contemporary art-world’. He notes that ‘… when they did finally win citizenship rights [Indigenous cultures] … refused to surrender their ancestral identities’, and that ‘… many Indigenous people sought to negotiate a path between the modernity of the nation state and their ancestral identities—identities that are simultaneously traditional and contemporary’. He argues that, despite the emergence of ‘a new meta-narrative of world art that comprises multiple currents of art practice, including Indigenous ones’, and the fact that Indigenous art now seems to have been accepted by Australian institutions as contemporary art, that acceptance is not universal. The conference included sustained discussion of Indigenous art as a critical intervention into current notions of ‘world art’ and ‘contemporary art’, and as a key area of contemporary art practice. This important topic was also addressed by other speakers including lead paper presenters Howard Morphy and Lisa Reihana.

The multiplicity of individual practices and issues of ethical, individual and locational identity identified by Meskimmon and McLean are central to the thoughtful and nuanced analysis provided by Jen Webb and Lorraine Webb in their essay, ‘Making Worlds: Art, Words and Worlds’. They are especially concerned with how artists’ individual approaches to the making of worlds might lead to new conceptual frameworks and, ‘possibly, new grounds for human connectivity’ at a local level in Aotearoa / New Zealand. Utilising ‘the twin concepts of plurality and practice’, they investigate how art might ‘enable an exploration of connectivities and differences, and how it might form a venue for the making of worlds that are not fully in accord with contemporary logics and “truths”’. They do this through discussion of a recent exhibition of the work of seven artists, including Indigenous artists—Kura Te Waru Rewiri, Kate Lepper, Faith McManus, Lily Laita, Lorraine Webb, Chaco Kato and Helen Manning. The exhibition entitled ‘Making Worlds’ was held in a regional city in New Zealand, Whanganui, a major site for indigenous rights protests in Aotearoa. ‘“The world,”’ they write, ‘seems, often, to be more a proposition than a place, more a theory than a thing-in-itself. The fluidity of its meanings means that the dominant discourse tends to focus on the conceptual,
the economic and the political, rather than on lived experience, phenomenological encounters, or the multiple ways of being in what each person might consider “the world”. As they state in their conference abstract, ‘Art is perhaps underdetermined compared with linguistic and political mediums, but it may have equally profound effects on how lived worlds emerge and are understood.’

Mark Nicholls and Anthony White’s essay, ‘Il gesto: Global Art and Italian Gesture Painting in the 1950s’, is an illuminating case study of an Italy emerging from Fascism to reconnect to a cosmopolitan, international, post-war art world and to become a cosmopolitan centre for art practice. This was an extraordinary time in modern European history, when ‘Italy emerged from wartime chaos and ruin to become one of the world’s great post-war democratic and economic successes’, as the authors put it. The essay explores what role art played in this recovery and how the ‘vibrant and cosmopolitan art scene in post-war Italy helped to shape a society undergoing a difficult period of transition.’ That ‘the visual arts were considered important to this recovery’, they argue, ‘is demonstrated by the enormous effort put into art and cinema in Italy at the time of the European Recovery Program [Marshall Plan]’. The ways artists responded to the postwar challenge and to forging relationships with new global communities is the key focus of the essay. These included ‘exchanges at the micro-level between individual artists and artistic groups across Europe, the Americas and Asia’. Nicholls and White demonstrate ‘how, contrary to earlier accounts which have interpreted the presence of American Abstract expressionism in countries like Italy as a weapon of “soft power”, the Italian response in its international dimensions allowed for distinctive, regional responses to broader transnational developments in art’.

Anthony Gardner and Charles Green address our sub-theme of ‘crossing borders: artists, institutions, exhibitions and audiences’ with an insightful analysis of the early years of the Sydney Biennale, which set out in the 1970s to connect a regionally isolated Australia to the international art world. This was a time when art was still dominated internationally by what Gardner and Green call, ‘crushingly hegemonic centre/periphery relationships’. Their essay draws on jointly written research towards a forthcoming book by both authors on mega-exhibitions and landmark international survey shows, characterised by them as one of the most significant phenomena in contemporary global culture. Their main focus in this essay is the Sydney Biennale of 1979, curated by Nick Waterlow, with the title ‘European Dialogue’ and excluding American artists because of concerns in the context of the Cold War that are outlined in the essay.

The 1979 Biennale, the authors argue, set out to do more than bring international artists to Australia. It also set up a model of new international artistic dialogue. It also, however, created negative Australian criticism. On a local level, they write, the Sydney Biennale had begun in 1973 ‘with the mission of engaging two
separate groups—on the one hand, local artists, students and intellectuals; on the other, the general public—with the latest forms of contemporary art’. In the 1970s, however, it offered a confused and contradictory place for local art. The authors write: ‘In effect, Waterlow wanted to create a Biennale that would be a popular exhibition for a regional public as well as the expression of local artists groups’ wishes for a fuller representation of Australians and women artists. It was to be a dialogue with living artists’. But, despite his close consultation with local artists, the actual lack of local representation and of women artists led to the publication of a ‘book-length manifesto’ by frustrated local artists: *Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring. Comments from the Art Community 1979*, from which the Gardner–Green essay derives its title. Yet, it was the 1979 Biennale that, for the first time, attracted international attention: ‘After 1979, the Sydney Biennale had become Australia’s mediator with the global—or more accurately the “global” art world of Europe and North America’.

The authors provide us with a larger understanding of the transformations taking place internationally: ‘For its founders, the Biennale initially appeared to be Australia’s lifeline to the outside art world. Even at that time, for many artists, it was simply one forum amongst many. For some—even in 1979 for the local artists who were most likely to be invited into these biennials—Australia, like other “marginal” centres like Brazil or Argentina, possessed a more complex and cosmopolitan art scene than simply that of a collection of small, parochial, provincial cities’.

Ironically, although this is not discussed by Gardner and Green, it was the art of Aboriginal Australia which was to be the Australian art that the world would respond to most over the next few decades. In this sense McLean’s essay, and that of Gardner and Green, each provides a fascinating counterpoint in terms of Australian art and its connection to the ‘world’ at a critical time for Australian art.

The papers by Zara Stanhope and Claire Roberts both also take up the issue of local artistic activity in different local contexts: Amsterdam, the Netherlands and contemporary China. Stanhope does so in relation to an artistic project that attempted to give residents a stimulus to question the socially engineered world of a newly designed European cityscape, where artists interrogated the new urbanism through relational art practices; and Roberts through a case study of the art of internationally prominent Chinese artist Yang Fudong, whose work has been shown in many mega exhibitions throughout the world, including the Venice Biennale.

Stanhope’s essay is an examination of Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk’s social art project, *Het Blauwe Huis* (‘The Blue House’), and explores the project’s capacity for world-making from the local, urbanised context of IJburg, in Amsterdam.
As Stanhope explains, *The Blue House* was essentially ‘a villa, an exceptionally large home with a distinctive blue interior’ based in the new neighbourhood of IJburg. More than a physical space, *The Blue House* was also a social art project involving artists and others researching the new IJburg neighbourhood over a three-and-a-half-year period, from June 2005 to December 2009.

Situating her discussion of *The Blue House* within the recent turn to what has been variously argued as ‘relational’, ‘socially engaged’ or ‘participatory art’ projects, Stanhope’s analysis of *The Blue House* explores van Heeswijk’s intentions for the project and examines these against the participatory art methods employed for it, as well as the project’s final outcomes. In so doing, Stanhope outlines various individual projects supported by *The Blue House*, some proposed by local residents and others initiated by the diverse members of *The Blue House*, including artists, architects and academics. The result of these projects, Stanhope suggests, is a ‘creative milieu’ under van Heeswijk’s leadership, with potential to extend the intentions of social art to world-making elsewhere.

While Stanhope’s essay explores the notion of ‘world-making in art’ at the localised level of *The Blue House* in IJburg, she also points to other worlds within which *The Blue House*, against its desires for autonomy, became enmeshed, including state policy and the global forces of creative industries. Thus, Stanhope’s essay reveals the social or participatory aesthetics of *The Blue House* as an effect of both local and transnational intersections demonstrating ‘the relational nature of the world’ and practices of world-making.

Contemporary artists from China have been at the forefront of the transformations of global art over the last two decades that have witnessed the diminishing significance of a EuroAmerican centre. There are, of course, underlying economic and geopolitical reasons that help explain why many Chinese artists have become prominent in the twenty-first century international art scene.

Roberts explores critical themes of individual practice and the broader issues of today’s international art world in her essay ‘Tolerance: The World of Yang Fudong’. She begins her essay by pointing to ‘the difficulty of comprehending the complexity of contemporary Chinese society with its historic overlays of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Republicanism, Communism and state capitalism’. She writes that ‘Today Chinese artists live and work in a globalised world of a kind that was impossible to imagine 30 years ago, a unique mix of Communist control and free-wheeling economics. Chinese experimental art reflects world trends.’ There is, however, a continuing issue of ‘a dichotomy between state or collective and individual perceptions of what constitutes reality’. As she says: ‘Like many of his contemporaries Yang Fudong regards himself as an artist rather than a Chinese artist. He has ready access to information
about contemporary art from around the world and chooses to live and work in China rather than sojourn abroad as was the case with an earlier generation.’ She goes on to provide us with a sensitive analysis of cultural nuances underlying this artist’s work and of the concept of ‘tolerance’ in relation to ‘people, art and life’ and how the Chinese notion of tolerance is ‘imbued with particular cultural and political resonances’. In so doing she gives us significant insights into the ‘worlds’ of Chinese contemporary art and of the simultaneously interconnected art worlds of the global, the regional and the local that constitute contemporary art today.

It is perhaps fitting that Roberts’ essay closes the volume as the world is realigned and re-pictured yet again in the twenty-first century, and especially in view of the renewed economic, political and cultural significance of Asia in the world today. Art is undoubtedly a tremendous impetus in reshaping perspectives of the world and narratives of world-making. Significantly, however, as the wide range of papers from the conference also demonstrates, the world and world-making in art are not homogenous projects, but differentiated by plural and situated perspectives that compete for visibility and recognition in art historical debates and discourses. Perhaps this has always been the case in history but what seems particular to this moment in art historical discussions is a new approach and a determination to recognise connectivities and differences at the same time, to harness art’s critical possibilities for embracing difference as part of the very process of forging new and more complex notions of connection with others.
Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art: Planes and Connectivities

Terry Smith

It is difficult to imagine a theme more relevant to contemporary concerns than that of this conference.¹ The imagining of worlds within the World is a topic that has concerned me for some time, to the extent of nominating it in recent publications as one that is at the core of contemporary art, as it is of current being-in-the-world, and thus definitive of our contemporaneity. For example, I conclude a recent article, ‘The State of Art History: Contemporary Art’, with the following remarks:

Placemaking, world picturing and connectivity are the most common concerns of artists these days because they are the substance of contemporary being. Increasingly, they override residual distinctions based on style, mode, medium and ideology. They are present in all art that is truly contemporary. Distinguishing, precisely, this presence in each artwork is the most important challenge to an art criticism that would be adequate to the demands of contemporaneity. Tracing the currency of each artwork within the larger forces that are shaping this present is the task of contemporary art history.²

These are, I know, bold claims, but I am encouraged in pursuing them because I know them to be accurate pointers to the main (but of course not the only) concerns of contemporary artists. They are also a straightforward—if rather summary—description of the enterprise of many art critics, historians and theorists of visual cultures working throughout the world today.

The second issue of the journal World Art is devoted to contemporary art. I have contributed an essay that attempts to answer the question: Can we say that contemporary art is—perhaps for the first time in history—truly an art of the world? I argue along the following lines:

As biennales have for decades attested, art now comes from the whole world, from a growing accumulation of art-producing localities that no longer depend on the approval of a metropolitan centre and are, to an unprecedented degree, connected to each other in a multiplicity

of ways, not least regionally and globally. Geopolitical change has shifted the world picture from presumptions about the inevitability of modernisation and the universality of EuroAmerican values to recognition of the coexistence of difference, of disjunctive diversity, as characteristic of our contemporary condition. Contemporary life draws increasing numbers of artists to imagine the world—here understood as comprising a number of contemporaneous ‘natures’: the natural world, built environments (‘second nature’), virtual space (‘third nature’), and lived interiority (‘human nature’)—as a highly differentiated yet inevitably connected whole. In this sense, from what we might call a planetary perspective, contemporary art may be becoming an art for the world—for the world as it is now, and as it might be.¹

My essay is accompanied by an insightful commentary by Marsha Meskimon that adds much depth to my raw intuitions about the affective dimensions of the kinds of coeval ethics called for in contemporary conditions: the world ‘as it might be’. Ian McLean has also contributed an important essay that ties, in his unique way, the world to Australian perceptions of it.

Two ideas from within the passage I have just quoted attract attention as being key topics of relevance to this conference. For over 50 years now, a world historical shift from EuroAmerican hegemony to a declining dominance within an increasingly differentiated world geopolitical and economic order has been underway—recently, at an accelerating pace. It has found expression in art, I suggest, as a shift from various kinds of practices oriented for, against or at oblique angles to modernisation (not all of which are modernist) to practices that arise out of contemporary conditions. I will return in my conclusion to some implications for art historical writing of this world-wide shifting from modern to contemporary art.

Worlds-Within-The-World

I want to focus the main part of my remarks on the kinds of worlds that are envisaged in the passage I just quoted. I will not develop the metaphor of worlds as ‘natures’. I am of course alluding to world picturing as envisaged by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the Communist Manifesto of 1848, the quintessential description of the forces at play in the then modernising world. Rather, I will put before you a description that I believe is more suitable to our current, post-1989 circumstances: that of contemporaneous worlds linked by a mix of direct determination, contingency, planetary transformation, and also, paradoxically, by particular kinds of non-contemporaneity.

There is, I acknowledge, a degree of foolishness in attempting such general descriptions. This is especially true at times of world disturbance, a truth we see pictured in the famous image of the **World Map (Fool’s Cap)**, c. 1590.

The most recent mapping of the continents (close to those published by Ortelius in the 1580s) is framed by a court jester’s outfit, and laced with mottoes of biblical and classical origin, all of them warning against the vanity of presuming to know too much. The legend in the left panel reads: ‘Democritus of Abdera laughed at [the world], Heraclitus of Ephesus wept over it, Epichontius Cosmopolites portrayed it’. Across the cap’s brow, the inscription translates as ‘O head, worthy of a dose of hellebore’. The Latin quotation just above the map is from Pliny the Elder: ‘For in the whole universe the earth is nothing else and this is the substance of our glory, this is its habitation, here it is that we fill positions of power and covet wealth, and throw mankind into an uproar, and launch wars, even civil ones’. The reason for this chaos is explained in the quotation below the map, from Ecclesiastes: ‘The number of fools is infinite’. The jester’s staff at right also cites this book: ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’. Inscribed on the badges adorning the shoulder belt are sayings to the effect:
‘Oh, the worries of the world; oh, how much triviality is there in the world’, ‘Everyone is without sense’, and ‘All things are vanity: every man living’. The most important motto is the one that presides above them all, the Latin version of the Greek dictum ‘Know thyself’. Framing scientific truths as ‘fancies’ was, of course, an essential strategy at times of Inquisition. In 1590 we were 40 years into the Roman Inquisition, and 40 years before the trial of Galileo Galilei.

How does the challenge of world picturing resonate in contemporary art? Let me begin in an equally specific way, with these words of Adelaide artist Fiona Hall: ‘I live in the late twentieth century and this is my subject matter and what influences my work. I’m informed everyday by switching on the evening news, by looking at the newspaper, by reading current art magazines, by observing events around me—I think my work reflects this and it therefore has a contemporary presence. I certainly hope it does’. Julie Ewington identifies Hall’s Gulf War ceramics of 1991 as a turning point in the artist’s efforts to discern the impact of distant, ‘world events’ on the closeness that constitutes our sense of place. Since then, Hall has consistently attempted to show how global forces shape locality by tracking their presence in everyday objects, which she then assembles into evocative installations. Her *Biodata* series includes works such as *Medicine bundle for the non-born child* (1994): a delicate-looking baby’s layette knitted from strips made from Coca-Cola cans, with the addition of a six-pack of cans with rubber teats. The transformation of coca leaves and nuts as medicinal plants in South America into the ubiquitous symbol of commodity capitalism, which has become a dangerously unhealthy addiction for millions, is amusingly yet sharply suggested.

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4 Versions held in the Bodleian Library at University of Oxford and the Royal Geographic Society in London. Translations by Frank Jacobs on his *Strange Maps* site, post no. 480, viewed 20 February 2013, http://bigthink.com/ideas/24015


Courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
At first glance, Hall’s sculpture *Incontinent* (1997) might imply the gathering around a table of two individuals suffering from loosened bowels, but I read it as a subtle visualisation of some of the key connectivities operative in the world today. It is part of a suite of similar works from 1998–99—*Drift Net, Fieldwork, White History, Dead in the Water* and *Cell Culture*—in which quasi-anthropomorphic forms suggest body parts that have been subject to scientific examination, quasi-organic forms suggest plumbing fixtures or medical instruments, while animal parts merge into machinic elements. Much of this merging is conveyed by the choice of materials: PVC pipe, plastic, glass beads. The economic history of the use of these materials is grounded in cruel colonialism and vastly exploitative imperialism. *White History* places on one side of a Natural History Museum style vitrine a black orb, on the other a white metronome, and connects them visually through intricate piping. The black orb had appeared one year before in *Incontinent*, where it faced off across the Formica tabletop against a white, twisted pipe that culminated facedown in a plastic suction cap. The game, on the surface, is simple. On a plane spotted with holes, there are two players, one that rolls uncontrollably, the other that is fixed in place: two continents are symbolised, two civilisations perhaps, but they are shown as embodying two kinds of impotence. If the tabletop is the world that we can see clearly, the legs below show that the world is supported by a firm structure that has risen from beautifully turned natural wood, switched into metal piping, and holds up what is probably pulpboard laminated with marbleised plastic. The three ages of manufacture elegantly evoked. In between them, however, twists a parallel structure, more rhizomatic in character: random, over-elaborated plumbing fixtures, molded from Tupperware, and pierced with delicate designs representing the flora and fauna of the world’s continents. Perforated like this, these pipes do not hold water. The incontinence of the continents.

Courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
In recent years Hall has sought ever more subtle ways of suggesting the complex connections that have shaped the contemporary world. *Cash Crop* (1998) displayed a variety of everyday and exotic plants carved in soap the botanical names for which were matched with terms from financial markets. *Leaf Litter* (1999–2003) is a series that connects the concentration of wealth in parts of the world with the distribution of plant species that has been crucial to that accumulation. Black and white images of plant species (taken from historic botanical illustrations) are painted in gouache on brightly coloured banknotes, each carefully chosen to suggest a historical or present relationship. As Ewington comments: ‘This ambitious profusion is essential to the work: it embodies the almost unimaginable richness of the natural world, the breadth of human knowledge about plants and their properties, and the gross and abundant energies of commercial traffic, creating edgy dialogues between all three’. Her works might be seen as artifacts of these dialogues: as examples of the kinds of thing that dialogic exchange between these forces and flows might be if they were, indeed, things. Small wonder that they seem such strange, impossible hybrids, and yet look like things that have always existed but have never been seen before.

**Spatial Layering, Temporal Contemporaneousness**

Like many other artists working today, Hall’s work displays the physical conjunction of a number of different kinds of world: the intimate, personal sense of ‘my world’; the close neighbourhood of the local; further worlds, increasingly distant beyond, until a sense of the World in general is reached; then the transitory, ‘no-places’ in between. Furthermore, this kind of art evokes the co-temporality of these worlds, their differential movement through time. Let me take this spatial idea of simultaneous worlds and marry it to the idea of these worlds sharing temporal contemporaneousness in an effort to envisage the structure of the world as we experience it today. Beginning spatially, we might imagine four planes, surfaces, fields, arenas, or domains that stand to each other as layers—‘orders’ in an older parlance, or ‘levels’ in a more recent one. Let us call them ‘worlds’ in the sense of worlds-within-the-World.

**WORLD/WORLDS: PLANES, LAYERS**

- Earth, planet, natural histories, evolution, information
- Sentient interiority (human, animal, things? machinic?)
- Societies, social relations, cultures, local economies, nation states
- Geopolitics and economics, international arrangements, ngos, civilisations

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7 Ewington, Fiona Hall, p. 173.
I have been inspired to this (tentative) proposal partly in reaction against the somewhat simplistic modeling recently advanced by theorists of globalisation and government such as Samuel P. Huntington and Joseph Nye Jr. Nye suggests that we envisage the distribution and play of power throughout the world as a chess game played on multiple boards at once, in which actors moving pieces on one board (say, the geopolitical) impact on another (say, the cultural). He urges that, if the United States is to retain its preeminence it must act in awareness of the effects of power across all relevant domains, and do in a planned way, within frameworks of conscious policy (thus his concept of ‘soft power’, avidly adopted as a tool of foreign policy by governments around the world today, not least the Chinese government). Being actually more concerned with coercive power, having forgotten their Foucault, and being unconcerned about climate change, both Nye and Huntington pay little attention to interiority and the planetary. But their models do have the virtue of highlighting the fact that we form perspectives on the world at large according to the forces in play within the world, or worlds, in which we mostly act, or most immediately need to act, and that we are often unaware, or unable to envisage, the nature of the relationships that connect them.

With these cautions in mind, let me complicate the diagram with some suggestions as to the kinds of relationship that are commonly held to connect these planes. I indicate only some of the most prominent forms that these relationships take, through the names that these relationships have attracted.

WORLD/WORLDS/WORLDING: PLANES & RELATIONSHIPS
- Earth, planet, natural histories, evolution, information
- Indigeneity, ecology, virtuality
- Sentient interiority (human, animal, machinic? things?)
- Art, language, sexualities, belief, humanities, sciences, media
- Societies, social relations, local economies, nation states, cultures
- Diplomacy, war, criminality, cooperation
- Geopolitics and economics, international arrangements, NGOs, civilisations
- Modernity, globalisation, globality, planetarity

To ‘complete’ (to the degree that that is possible) my first, evidently tentative sketch of this world picture, I would posit that a host of actions, difficult to diagram, actually weave the connections, are the substance of relationships, within this model. Let us call them ‘connectivities’. They include imagination, feeling, projection, identification, communication; producing, consuming, presuming; warring, surging, peace-making, reconciling, deterring, negotiating; searching, networking, flocking; and many others both shared and specific to

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particular practices. Imagine them as threads weaving through these layers and forms of connection, thus giving us a three-dimensional matrix. (I hope that the relevance of Fiona Hall’s impossible hybrids is now clear.) Let us call this overall activity, this weaving of connectivities, ‘world-making’ or ‘worlding’.

Please notice what we might call the rounding of the model, its return to itself, such that our taking of the Earth itself as the grounding matches, at world scale, a planetary consciousness rather than a globalising thirst for dominance and hegemony. (One ambition is to enable a conception of the world that does not begin from the image of the globe, or that of a map of continents, but of course includes them within a broader pictorial imagining of worlds-within-the-World that now stretches through more space and more time and in more differentiated ways that hitherto imaginable.)

If something like this connective layering is the structure of our intersecting worlds, how might we understand it to have changed throughout time? I am incapable of imagining this across more than a few decades with any confidence (and even then with much trepidation), before succumbing to an unfounded hubris. But others, thank heavens, are less restrained. We can see in our cinemas today one such example: Terrence Malick film, The Tree of Life. For all of its obvious flaws, New Age over-reaching, and quasi-Creationist banalities, this is an extraordinary effort to imagine visually the world historical dynamic of something like the structure I have just sketched.

Country and Connectivity

One element lacking from Malick’s world picture is Indigeneity. In this country, recently, we are learning to take indigenous perspectives less as obligatory additions to a broader but nonetheless Eurocentric perspective, more as something close to an equivalent, indeed preceding, starting point. For millennia, indigenous Australians have been depicting ‘country’ to themselves as part of ceremony and less formal spiritual observance. The ‘masterpieces’ of the contemporary Aboriginal art movement are complex, multilayered evocations of convergent ‘dreaming lines’ across vast actual and religious territory. Classic examples, to take two from the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, range from Mawalan and Wanjuk Marika’s Djan’kawu Creation Story (1959) to John Mawurndjul’s Mardayin (2001), or, to take two from the collection of the

9 Just how difficult it is to move from this limited repertoire of models can be seen from recent surveys of modes of data visualisation. See, for example, Lima, M. 2011, Visual Complexity: Mapping Patterns of Information, New York, Princeton Architectural Press.
National Gallery of Victoria, *Napperby death spirit Dreaming*, painted by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri in 1980, to *Ngayarta Kajarra*, painted in 2009 by a large group of artists from Punmu, Western Australia. Connectivity may be understood less as a state of being connected in some fixed array, more as an ongoing process of seeking out the lineaments of connection, catching glimpses of them, allowing them to resonate, change, and inevitably loosen, only to seek them again. Something of this spirit informs the 2006 collaboration between Pura-lia Meenamatta, a poet from the Ben Lomond clan of the Cape Portland nation of North-East Tasmania who is also named Jim Everett, and Jonathan Kimberley, an eighth generation descendent of First Fleet convicts, a painter who lives and works between Hobart and Warmun, Western Australia. Their *meenamatta lena narla puellakanny—Meenamatta Water Country Discussion* took the form of an exchange between 13 of Pura-lia Meenamatta’s poetic/prosodic reflections and ten of Kimberley’s paintings. Pura-lia Meenamatta’s poems range from evocative observations of creeks, rivers and rainwater at places in his country to speculations on water’s centrality in global politics. ‘Some call me water’ begins:

some call me water  
nearly all need me  
i touch nearly everything  
connecting the inanimate  
with living things

whereas ‘Europa’ consists entirely of these lines:

colonies established post-colonialism  
which became neo-colonialism in the  
new nation of people exclusively  
under the controlling marketplace  
until all-life dies and neo-colonialism  
reaches its final regression  
in broken water dead.  

A student in Melbourne during the later 1980s, Jonathan Kimberley is of a generation of painters for whom the contemporary Aboriginal art movement was no longer a fascinating, from—the—deserts phenomenon, its future filled with as much uncertainty as hopefulness. Yet it had not quite achieved the diversity of output, continent-wide spread and depth of market that have made it, since 2000, a structural force at least as definitive of Australian art as the work of non-indigenous artists. During the 1990s interaction between the two kinds of ‘Australian’ art waxed and waned, often becoming intense, even volatile—especially when artists on both ‘sides’ used appropriative strategies.

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Exchanges between Michael Nelson Tjakamarra and Tim Johnson, and those between Gordon Bennett and Imants Tillers, are striking pairings among a wide variety. If they began as actions that sought to cross deep cultural divides, these encounters subsequently underwent complex transformations, only some of which can be properly understood as convergences.\(^\text{12}\)

Kimberley and Pura-lia Meenamatta have inherited this history. Their approach, however, is post-appropriative. After graduating, Kimberley elected to live and work in remote communities, and was the founding manager of the Warmun Art Centre at Turkey Creek (1998–2000). In his paintings, echoes of some of the major Aboriginal artists may be seen (Michael Nelson’s wild brushstrokes, Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s lines), as may that of others (Jackson Pollock’s thrown networks, Colin McCahon’s textual admonitions), but these are faint. And they are way less important than his tipping and tilting the canvas to let lines of poured paint run in rivulets, randomly, all over the linen, or his picking out the shapes of natural growth, or his writing across the resultant surfaces the words that should be sung over them.

Pura-lia Meenamatta (Jim Everett) and Jonathan Kimberley, 2006, *beyond the colonial construct: meenamatta map of unlandscape*, and *meenamatta water country*, Synthetic polymer, charcoal, text and linen, diptych, each work 244 x 244 cm.

Courtesy Bett Gallery, North Hobart

The core figure of *beyond the colonial construct: meenamatta map of unlandscape* (2006), a diagram, suggests at once a bush, a brain and a fish trap. It is a

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free-standing shape, but also a watery stain across a surface, one that leaves dissolving charcoal in its wake. It bursts up within a forest of trees. It hovers above four flowing rivers—of paradise, a reference to medieval mapping. Or it runs, shadow-like, beneath them. These are markings of a projective imagination. They are tokens of Kimberley’s efforts to think, visually, from a plangermairreener perspective. They begin to move toward their picturing of watery presence in their country, to showing how they might ‘map’ what is, to them, not a landscape. Kimberley pursues this goal in all of the paintings in the series: some come close to landscapes, others are conjunctions or overlays of entirely abstract forms. When joined to its companion painting, meenamatta water country, it becomes a diptych. It also becomes the summa of the series. The words inscribed across the surface, ‘meenamatta walantanalinany’, mean ‘meenamatta country all round’.

For his part, Pura-lia Meenamatta writes prose poems that seek to grasp the same subject, in his own language, but also in English. He writes them directly on to the painting. The shapes float, as if they are floating on water, like leaves, but also in water, like continents. Reading around beyond the colonial construct: meenamatta map of unlandscape from top left to top right, down to the bottom left, then across to the lower right quadrant, these are the titles of each text: ‘some call me water’, ‘this place is outside the bible’, ‘water’, ‘blue tears in manalarlerna country’, ‘water spirits’, ‘in the time of living origin’, ‘birthing water’, ‘tubuna’, ‘antipodes’, ‘planegarrttoothner’, ‘asia’, ‘africa’, and ‘europa’. As I noted above, they range in imaginative scope from precise locations in the poet’s country to the evocations of movements outside of locative space and measurable time. Reversing Kimberley’s approach, but matching it, they use English in ways that attempt to show plangermairreener perceptions about being-in-the-world to Western presumptions about space and time. They are Pura-lia Meenamatta’s shot at locating his world views within those of the other.

For both artists, the point is to arrive at a state of connectivity between their separate ways of seeing what they take to be a shared world, one that is fully, but inadequately, described by each other’s ways of world picturing. Each perspective is inadequate, because for it to be complete, it would necessarily exclude the other. Neither wishes this outcome. Nor is such an outcome generalisable any longer. Is there a larger perspective that can encompass both? If there is, it is not what is in front of us. beyond the colonial construct: meenamatta map of unlandscape may have gotten beyond the colonial construct, but it has got as far as showing us a meenamatta mode of mapping the nether space in which water moves, the nexus of actual terrain and mythic time-space for which the two artists use the word ‘unlandscape’. Theirs is a deconstructive gesture, not as yet a constructive action. Perhaps this is why both painted and the textual surfaces read so flatly, why their evident thirst for depth and movement seems
so stilled. Nevertheless, to get this far is no inconsiderable achievement. It may be, in contemporary conditions, as far as we can get. The artists understand their collaboration, their conversation, to be just beginning.

**Contemporary World Currents**

Like the geographers and mapmakers who precede them, most contemporary artists quite sensibly confine themselves to envisaging one or two aspects of what it is to world (taken as an active verb) in contemporary conditions.\(^\text{13}\) Taken altogether, however, worlding is an enterprise that is unfolding at world scale, something that, perhaps, art itself—or, more broadly, the human visual imagination—is undertaking. If this is so, what is precipitating it?

In my recent work I have developed a historical hypothesis about how—in the latter decades of the twentieth century—modern art became contemporary, or, more accurately stated, about how it happened that the variety of modern, modernist, traditional and indigenous visual arts being produced all over the world could no longer be positioned relative to some broad, all-encompassing narrative of art’s historical development (such as modernism followed by postmodernism). For all of their evident differences (indeed, because the evidence of their difference was so intense) they became suddenly—in the first decade of the twenty-first century—simply coexistent, nakedly contemporaneous. It is this contemporaneity of difference that resonates throughout what we now see as contemporary art, as it does the expanded sense of worlds-within-the-World that constitutes our contemporary condition.

This is the sense in which I argue that a multi-faceted, highly differentiated shift from modern to contemporary art has occurred in distinct ways in the various art-producing centres and regions of the world. Many of us are involved in the enterprise of tracking these developments as they have unfolded in the localities and regions within which we work, and as they continue to do so. For example, John Clark’s outstanding work as an empirical researcher, art historiographer and meta-theorist of these developments as they play out in Asia.\(^\text{14}\) There is increasing interest in how these new narratives connect with each other—in how localities relate to others in their region, in how regions relate to contingently

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connected others; and in how specific localities and regions relate to the various forms of internationalisation that were abroad during the modern period and that have arisen in response to our contemporaneity. This is a trafficking in artists, artworks, images and ideas; in institutional practices and cultural stereotypes; in models of differentiation, cooperation and reconciliation; in ways of seeing worlds, and the World as a whole—in short, in world-making in the visual arts within the context of being-in-the-world, the contemporary structure of which I have been attempting to sketch.

I will conclude by outlining briefly how I have tackled this subject in my book *Contemporary Art: World Currents*. Within the atomistic particularity of all of the art being made today, I discern three main currents, and within these various tendencies that vary from each other in different ways within each current. Overall, I try to grasp what is distinct within each current and tendency, what is shared between them, and what emerges in the specific connections that occur between them. The first prevails in what were the great metropolitan centres of modernity in Europe and the United States (as well as in societies and subcultures, such as Australia, closely related to them) and is a continuation of styles in the history of art, particularly Modernist ones. Remodernist, retrosensationalist and spectacularist tendencies, fusing into one current, continue to predominate in EuroAmerican and some other modernising art-worlds and markets, with widespread effect. The second has arisen from movements toward political and economic independence that occurred in former colonies and on the edges of Europe, and is thus shaped above all by clashing ideologies and experiences. The result is that artists prioritise both local and global issues as the urgent content of their work. It came into prominence on international circuits such as biennales and travelling temporary exhibitions—this is the art of transnational transitionality. Thirdly, the great increase in the number of artists world-wide, and the opportunities offered by new informational and communicative technologies to millions of users, has led to the viral spread of small-scale, interactive, d-i-y art (and art-like output) that is concerned less with high art style, or confrontational politics, more with explorations of temporality, place, affiliation and affect—the ever more uncertain conditions of contemporaneity on a fragile planet. Taken together, I suggest, these currents constitute the contemporary art of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. World picturing is common to them all, but it is done in very different ways, and for different reasons. The contemporaneity of these differences is what makes today’s art contemporary.
The Precarious Ecologies of Cosmopolitanism

Marsha Meskimmon

Making Worlds After the Fact

Fleeting, fragile patterns, rendered in dust, gradually covered the floor of an abandoned Georgian farmhouse in Bicker, Lincolnshire, as the artist Catherine Bertola meticulously ‘cleaned’ the space from dawn to dusk each day for nearly a month in 2006.\(^1\) Her cleaning\(^2\) was a drawing in, and out from, dust—a slow, repetitive process of working with the material residue of the past in the space of the present, so that the two worlds collided, \textit{after the fact}. Their collision was quotidian, rather than dramatic, the traces of one world were re-made in another using the humblest, yet most ubiquitous of materials—dust. The particles that materialised the elaborate, yet tenuous, interconnections between past and present worlds in \textit{After the Fact} were themselves evocative of a double movement in time. Dust signals both the radical un-making of the world, its movement toward entropy, and the agency of world-making, the material trace left in the wake of human and non-human activities that seek to give shape and meaning to the world.

I want to suggest that there is a compelling connection between the dust that was so central to \textit{After the Fact} and a provocative statement made by American philosopher Nelson Goodman when he considered from what we might make worlds. As he argued: ‘Not from nothing, after all, \textit{but from other worlds}. World-making as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking.’\(^3\) Goodman’s formulation is a useful starting point for thinking through the complexities of worlds and world-making in art as it reminds us that there is no outside to art-making, no privileged beyond from which to represent a world, only the stuff of which the art and the world both comprise. From dust to world, from world to dust, world-making in art is always \textit{after the fact}.

\(^1\) Catherine Bertola’s site-specific installation, \textit{After the Fact} was performed as part of the Beacon Art project of 2006, \textit{no place, like home}, curated by John Plowman across a number of sites in Lincolnshire between 9 September and 10 October.

\(^2\) ‘Cleaning’ is literally invoked here—the work was made of dust, soap and polish, using dusters and cleaning cloths as tools. The notion of cleaning as women’s work was also recognised by the artists and by a number of critics of the work. See for example, ‘Uncovering the Past with Catherine Bertola’ Catherine Bertola interviewed by Victoria Redshaw, \textit{Opus Trends Blog}, posted March 2009, http://trendsblog.co.uk/?p=358

fact, yet never out of time. There is no end to the enterprise of world-making, nor to the potential for material transformation in art-making. Nor does world-making in art conform to a unidirectional temporality, a teleological mission or final utopian destination. World-making in this sense is ecological, it describes ongoing, mutable processes and systems of relation that take place between living and non-living things. And, arguably, where art-making becomes world-making, materiality becomes crucial to ecology.


Courtesy the artist, Workplace Gallery and Galerie M+R Fricke
Bertola’s recurrent labour in making *After the Fact* was as integral to its meaning as the dust from which it was made. The large and complex patterned dust drawing threatened to decompose, to be *un-made*, without the continual attention, effort and care of the artist as she ‘cleaned’ the floor each day. When she departed, dust slowly reclaimed the space leaving only the photographic trace of the work as its legacy. The hours upon hours of Bertola’s laborious cleaning never displaced the dust, her excessive work could neither hold back time, nor remove the residual traces of past worlds. The work’s production was itself an instance of world-making as re-making, the ecology it sustained for the period of its installation was a perpetual material transformation in and of time. The resultant site-specific drawing did not simply replace the ‘past’ with the ‘present’, but brought them together within the same space, in and of the same material, transformed.

Significantly, *After the Fact* did not illustrate the history of its site, nor did it present an image of a Georgian domestic interior. Rather, it produced a space in which it was possible to (re-)encounter, imaginatively, the curves and arabesques that once adorned the papered walls of the Georgian farmhouse, now gone to dust. Re-animated through patterns traced in that self-same dust, their tenuous lines were drawn out across the wooden floor. The space was thus articulated as a locus for memory and imagination that collapsed time and folded worlds into one another through their re-making as art. In this re-making, facture and material were intimately intertwined and mutually constitutive. The repetitive activity of drawing *in* dust, allowed the emergence of the dust *as* drawing. Returning to Goodman: ‘The many stuffs—matter, energy, waves, phenomena—that worlds are made of are made along with the worlds.’

If we are able to describe the agency of Bertola’s work as an ecology, as a dynamic and sustainable system of relations between subjects, objects and their environment, we must also acknowledge the fragile, ephemeral nature of this ecology. *After the Fact* was a precarious ecology, a world re-made in art that risked its un-making at every turn. Dust is unsettling sediment; the slightest touch disturbs it, yet its presence is pervasive. The dust drawing at the centre of the installation was precarious; despite its complexity and the repetitive activity of its making, it was fragile and ephemeral, subject to the vicissitudes of movement in its vicinity and to reclamation by the accumulation of new layers of dust over time. It required human maintenance, continual acts of re-making, to remain *in situ*. *After the Fact* demonstrates viscerally, in the affective force of its materiality, the fact that even the most elaborate and carefully-composed world may be fleeting and fragile.

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4 Ibid.
I want to suggest, however, that the precarious ecology configured by *After the Fact* is more nuanced than these direct references to its ephemeral materials and tenuous factura convey. While the precarious does signal fragility, ephemerality, uncertainty and risk, its etymology further connects it with prayer or entreaty. That which is precarious is dependent upon the will or favour of another; it is obtainable through earnest request or negotiation. Arguably, *After the Fact* could only be produced by working *with* the dust, rather than *upon* or *against* it; the work was effected through an active negotiation with the parameters of the space and its material constraints. The repetitive cleansing traced the lines and patterns of the dust in concert with its own textures, forms and proclivities. The sound derived from the repeated actions of the artist in making the work were recorded and played back into the space, producing a sonic equivalent to its gestural notation. Whilst not a space of prayer in any formal religious sense, the recurrent movements of the artist, accompanied by the rhythmic aurality of the recording in the space, eloquently evoked the meditative qualities of introspective reflection that commonly attend quiet engagement with repetitious manual tasks.

Perhaps not surprisingly, entreaty shares a common root (*trahere*) with trace; to entreat is to *draw down* favour. In drawing out the resonances between the particles and the floor, the times past and present that inhered to the interstitial fabric of the dust yielded themselves to the making of the work through the communion between the body of the maker and the world that was being made. In *After the Fact*, drawing became a form of entreaty, a precarious act of engaged world-making in which subjects and objects were mutually configured as they were drawn forth, in dust, gesture and breath.

The mercurial materiality and manufacture of *After the Fact* articulated a precarious ecology in an abandoned farmhouse for a month in 2006 and then was gone. Our engagement with the work now, therefore, must always be ‘after the fact’, our invocation of its affective force summoned through careful and attentive description of what once was made in dust, that has now gone to dust. We cannot experience it again, nor can we inspire others to make the pilgrimage to the work to experience it themselves. However, dust drawings have a history within European modernism, a history of material transformation through photography that complicates their precarious existence as worlds made in art. In 1920, Marcel Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, which had lain for some years in his studio, undisturbed, collecting dust, became the subject of his interest again, and that of his friend and fellow artist, Man Ray. In what is now acknowledged as a collaborative work, the piece was transformed through photography and re-named: *Dust Breeding (Large Glass with Dust Notes)*, 1920.

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5 Information on Bertola’s dust work usually notes Duchamp and Man Ray.
Like *Dust Breeding*, I want to argue strongly that *After the Fact* is not simply a past work, documented in photographs, but a work that has a vital photographic component within its larger and more complex configuration, and that this component adds an important dimension to the dynamics of the piece. In *After the Fact*, the photographic images of the dust drawing *in situ* reiterate the complex temporality of the work and render its extraordinary physical presence palpable through the visual focus of the lens. The photograph allows the viewer to grasp the space and the fragile drawing on its floor in one, immediate, look; its transformation of dust traced through light into indexical image adds to the visceral experience of ephemerality in the work by capturing a single moment and holding it stillled.

The photographs of *After the Fact* are haptic—experienced as tactile through the visual—and they engage us bodily in a work that we may never see ‘in the flesh’. In this sense, they participate in what Olivier Asselin, Johanne Lamoureux and Christine Ross have called ‘precarious visuality’, a bodily form of vision that locates the subject within the dynamic aesthetics of the work, rather than as its distanced or disinterested observer.⁶ The multi-layered affective registers

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through which the work operates are thus not lost in the photograph, but redoubled. The precarious ecology of the work can be conveyed, after the fact, through the agency of the photograph.

I want also to suggest that one of the most significant qualities of the photographic trace of Bertola’s site-specific dust drawing is its capacity to make visible the extraordinary within the ordinary. The photographs are nearly monochrome, the space they image is non-descript, yet from within this quotidian visual locus emerges an elaborate figure, both two and three-dimensional, formed from light, shade, mass and volume, yet tenuous in its presence. It is hard to grasp, it compels us to look, to make it out. It might be called wondrous in its ability to make us regard again, that which we would otherwise simply overlook.\(^7\)

Indeed, our engagement with this work is premised upon many of the perceptual, cognitive and affective states that have, historically, been attributed to ‘wonder’—the rupture of the familiar by the appearance of the unfamiliar; a visceral, vertiginous and immediate response compelling an attitude of contemplative enquiry; a temporal suspension characterised by close attention to specific objects. Wonder is not the sublime and After the Fact does not overawe or overwhelm us. Its extraordinary qualities of elaboration and intricacy are a delicate surprise in the space, an unusual encounter within the realm of the familiar that brings us up against the limits of our recognition but offers no threat. It compels our enquiry to become embodied and engaged: What is this? How has it come to be here? What do I make of it? Pausing, lingering and taking pleasure in our encounter with the unfamiliar, we participate in the wondrous, precarious ecologies offered by world-making in art.

In his exploration of the significance of wonder to creative and intellectual enquiry, literary historian Philip Fisher has argued that:

> In locating the extraordinary back within the ordinary, explanation breaks open the fabric of the ordinary itself and changes it forever, both for thought and for perception…. The ordinary is not just the dictionary of things we are used to; it is also relations among them…. including contiguity, scale and genres of experience.\(^8\)

World-making is not of necessity dramatic, but it is, potentially, wondrous. We make worlds everywhere and always as we go about our daily rounds, we inhabit worlds that were made before our time and we make worlds that will exceed our own existence. The profundity of such domestic world-making is

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7 Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, in their pivotal 1998 publication on wonder, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (New York, Zone Books), note that regarding the same things anew is frequently a key feature of wonder as a ‘sensibility’, p. 18.

inscribed in the quotidian, and yet, the extraordinary is easily overlooked or disregarded when it resides within the everyday. As Fisher suggests, however, experiencing wonder in the face of the rupture of the extraordinary *within* the ordinary changes our relationship to the world forever.

Arguably, it is not simply a fortuitous coincidence that links the precarious with the wondrous in this particular work, but rather a more complex interweaving between the affective force of wonder and the materialisation of precarious ecologies in contemporary art. Wonder marks the boundaries of the known and recognised, the limits of the ever same. Moving beyond those limits is a precarious enterprise, risky and, as I will argue, dependent upon other subjects and objects in the world. Wonder is not the only affective play of the precarious that can be engendered by contemporary art, but it is an especially significant state in relation to the interpellation of subjects and agencies in world-making, where the work of world-making is premised upon our interconnections with others and our openness to difference and where world-making changes our relationship to the ordinary forever. As I will draw out in what remains of this essay, it is in this sense that the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitan world-making are so often wondrous.

**Tethering Time**

In 2001, Australian artist Joan Brassil (1919–2005) installed a large-scale sound sculpture in the grounds of the Campbelltown Arts Centre in the suburbs of Sydney. Entitled *A Tether of Time*, Brassil’s installation enfolds the macro within the micro, taking an oblique view through one particular space, of the many worlds that surround us, unobserved and unnoticed. Exploring the dynamics of this work enables further connections between the precarious and the wondrous to emerge in the world-making agency of art.

*A Tether of Time* consists of three main elements, roughly configured in the shape of a ‘T’. The ‘downstroke’ is inscribed by a slim flow of water over terraced steps, running some five metres along the length of the ground. This flow is neither like a natural river stream, nor a traditional fountain, but more like a miniature industrial canal or a modern interpretation of the channeled water in a Moorish garden. The ‘cross-stroke’ is marked by the most striking feature of the installation: five stainless steel tuning forks, strung with steel wire to produce a wind-harp over eight metres high. Each ‘fork’ has two smooth, soft-wood panels attached to its base which stand amidst stone slabs carved with poetic lines referring to the histories of the site, from Aboriginal origins to contact and the later development of a large suburb.

Courtesy the artist’s estate
A *Tether of Time* is typical of Brassil’s installation practice more generally, a practice characterised by a poetic use of industrial and technological materials and a meticulous attention to the details of site and meaning. However, the scale of the work, its permanence and its material and structural affinities with the built environment, set it apart from many of the more fragile and tenuous works that mark Brassil’s practice. Significantly, however, I want to argue in what follows that the work’s substantial physical presence neither negates the precariousness of its world-making, nor the wonder it is capable of engendering.

While the precarious is commonly associated with the fleeting and ephemeral, it can also suggest lingering on the very brink of change—in the terms of the present discussion, the precarious can describe the event of ecological balance, when mutable elements are poised in harmonic connection. *A Tether of Time* is not so much a free-standing sculpture, as one such ‘event’, a play conducted between the work’s varied physical components as they delineate the space of the sculpture garden and direct spectators’ viewpoints and movements within it. Its various shifts of scale and material are seemingly incompatible: the work is solid and fluid, it is massive and delicate, it is an object, an image, a space and a temporal event at once.

The balance of opposing forces in the work sets up a precarious ecology and surprises us with the extraordinary, tethered to the banal, time and again. Driving past the gallery and sculpture garden on one of the suburb’s ubiquitous small highways, littered with commercial premises, traffic signs, street lights, telephone and power poles strung with cables, we spot a glistening wind-harp by the side of the road. And yet, this harp is not at all unlike the street lights and telephone poles themselves—a fact which strikes one all the more powerfully from within the garden where the concrete and steel forms resonate with the oft-overlooked ‘view’ of commercial suburbia beyond. The installation’s contours, materials and setting actually connect the sculpture garden with the surrounding suburban landscape rather than maintaining its isolation as a ‘refuge’ from what is commonly conceived as an unappealing, disorganised sprawl. *A Tether of Time* intervenes in Campbelltown’s sculpture garden, rather than simply being set in it, and, in so doing, renders the everyday extraordinary. In addition, the work performs the space as a system of relations between subjects and objects within multiple worlds—the sculpture garden, the surrounding suburbs, the cosmos—it is an ecology. More strongly, I would suggest that the work entreats us to take an active role in re-making the world in this otherwise ordinary space; and if we answer this entreaty and engage with the work, we can partake of its precarious wonders.

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9 When I visited the site in February 2002, I noticed this myself and Joan Brassil confirmed that she had hoped the wind-harp would surprise drivers—shake them into an awareness of their surroundings.
In this sense, it is significant that *A Tether of Time* is a sound sculpture as well as a visual and material intervention into the space. The wind harps capture the movement of the air, making gentle calls, while the flowing water lightly babbles. However, the most fascinating and compelling sounds produced by the work cannot be heard just by walking past it, or by standing in the garden. To hear the unheard, it is necessary to press your ear against the wood at the base of the tuning forks, ‘hugging’ the poles and feeling their smooth, soft texture on your face. Standing in this way, the sound is magnificent; the slightest tremor of air, the resonance of the earth and the vibrations caused by the buildings and cables in Campbelltown are transformed into beautiful, vibrant song. By physically connecting with the work, the inaudible sounds of the world around you become audible—the virtual breaks into the temporal flow of the everyday in an aesthetic re-making of both the space and the subject who hears/imagines anew. Just as the seamlessness of daily experience is disrupted by the sight of a wind harp by the side of the road, these heterogeneous sounds interrupt our dulled continuity by bringing us to our senses and connecting us to change and opening us to difference.

In *A Tether of Time*, the extraordinary breaks into the ordinary through a critical shift in the attention of participant-observers, and I use the term ‘participant’ at this point most deliberately. *A Tether of Time* is not a work ‘in-itself’, an object offering itself to the distanced gaze of an onlooker. Rather, it requires the multi-sensory participation of subjects engaging with the work as a process of making connections across difference, to have any effect. The subject is here interpellated through an affective register as a perceptual instrument, captivated in wondrous arrest at the experience of their momentary connection to the cosmos. This enhanced mode of attention reveals the hidden, the unseen and unheard worlds that surround us; we are enworlded and world-making at once. Connected bodily to the random resonances of the multiple worlds we inhabit simultaneously, we become aware of the precariousness of our enworldment and how much threatens to disappear, overlooked, or pass away, unheard.10

Activating the precarious links between visual, spatial and aural forms of perception at the point of wonder, *A Tether of Time* facilitates our potential to inhabit spaces differently. Studies in the physiology of music are instructive here: it is impossible to ‘hear’ a continual monotone until it is disrupted by a variant sound, because ‘hearing’ is constituted at once by the physical perception of

vibration and the cognitive processing of the phenomenon as ‘sound’ which occurs in differentiation.\textsuperscript{11} ‘Hearing’ is constituted through attending to, and acknowledging, difference, as much as in any physical activity in the ear.

When we hear the unheard in contact with the tuning forks of Brassil’s installation, we are not only having new tonal ranges made available to our bodies through technological instruments, we are becoming aware of the simultaneity of our sensory perception and cognitive processing through the strategic production of a shift in our attention. We are made aware of our embodiment, and through this, our situation within worlds, and the knowledges, narratives and contexts these entail. Like After the Fact, A Tether of Time’s world-making is re-making, there is no beyond or outside from which to construct another, different or new, world; the new and the different emerge from past and present worlds, re-made, re-seen, re-heard. World-making in art that acknowledges our embeddedness, our embodied ‘worldliness’, articulates difference through, rather than beyond, the everyday.

These thoughts have some purchase in thinking through the connections between contemporary art and world-making in a global economy, for those of us who are committed to exploring the possibilities of engendering cross-cultural dialogues in and through difference, rather than conceding to a unified, cultural hegemony. What I have termed in this text ‘the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism’ are the sustainable, yet evolving, systems of relation that engender a generous intersubjectivity and an openness to difference. These ecologies are risky, subject to change, premised upon negotiation with others and, I would argue, absolutely critical to an ethical way of inhabiting a global world—to engendering a cosmopolitan imagination.\textsuperscript{12} I am suggesting that world-making in art is one of the ways in which we might instantiate the wondrous and precarious ecologies that enable us to glimpse the potential of the cosmopolitan imagination to ‘open the fabric of the ordinary and change it forever’.

The change in the fabric of the ordinary evoked through such precarious ecologies might better be understood as an exchange, or an encounter, between worlds and


\textsuperscript{12} In Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination, London, Routledge (2010), I developed the idea of ‘imagination’, specifically, but would note the work of Papastergiadis N. 2012, Cosmopolitanism and Culture, Oxford, Polity, in developing the notion of a cosmopolitan ‘imaginary’. The latter is an especially good way of bringing the cosmopolitan project into play through the notion of the cultural imaginary, which I would affirm. I have used ‘imagination’ so to link the idea more specifically to the work, for example, of philosophers Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, who have argued for the significance of imagination and imagining in the construction of a generous, responsible and intercorporeal subject. See Gatens, M., and Lloyd, G. 1999, Collective Imaginings: Spinoza Past and Present, London, Routledge. I would also note that despite our different emphases, Papastergiadis and I are very much aligned in our thinking about the importance of contemporary art to a cosmopolitan project.
subjects, both of whom are re-made in their meeting. Once we have encountered the drawing traced in dust, After the Fact, we cannot simply overlook the Lincolnshire site as derelict and unworthy of our attention. Bertola’s world-making re-makes the space and the subjects who engage with it; worlds and subjects are mutually reconstituted in the agency of the artwork. Tethering the temporality of the cosmos to the quotidian, A Tether of Time leaves its trace on those who participate, bodily, in the event it unfolds. The macro opens within the micro and is materialised through the perceptual cognition of the subject; subjects, objects, space and time are mutually re-made.

In a telling passage concerning the political dimensions of globalisation and transnational cultural exchange, Rob Wilson argued that:

at best, globalization is generating new forms of reflexivity, altered terms of citizenship, amplified melanges and ties to transnational culture, and thus provoking an aesthetic of openness toward otherness that is not just the chance for commodification, spectatorship, and colonization.13

Wilson’s ‘aesthetic of openness’ is significant. The aesthetic dimension formed part of what he termed the ‘new cosmopolitanism’, a cosmopolitanism that could, potentially, meet some of the political, ethical and juridical challenges of globalisation. This is not simply a reconstitution of the nineteenth-century European ideal of cosmopolitanism, which tends to privilege an elite form of world-travel through the consumption of high culture mixed with an exciting dash of ‘exotica’ from the ‘rest’ of the world. Rather, the cosmopolitanism being explored and developed by Wilson and other scholars, such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Seyla Benhabib and Mica Nava,14 is cognisant of the significant contribution of feminist and postcolonial debates to the framing of ‘world citizenship’ beyond a masculine-normative, Eurocentric project. Indeed, the work that has emerged in the past decade on cosmopolitanism in the social sciences and humanities is more commonly premised on making connections with others in the world across and through difference, whether those are cultural, sexual, national, ethnic and/or differences of class and economic status. These cosmopolitanisms are situated perspectives on the possibilities of dialogue and community building which acknowledge the complexities of the intertwining

of the local within the global. And, as I have argued at greater length elsewhere, these are cosmopolitanisms that have a significant relationship to the fields of aesthetics and art-making.\textsuperscript{15}

In exploring the specific idea of the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism articulated by contemporary art practices as world-making activities, and in connecting these with the affective state of wonder, I am here drawing upon the broad links between aesthetics, art and the embodied, enworlded cosmopolitanisms described very briefly above, but also extending these ideas in new ways. I want to suggest that particular ways of materialising our corporeal and affective exchanges with other subjects and objects in aesthetic world-(re)making activities, have precise ramifications for the development of an ethical cosmopolitan subjectivity and the politics of imagination.

There are three dimensions to these connections that are of particular significance here: the intrinsic links between elite and non-elite experiences and conceptions of precarity,\textsuperscript{16} the non-teleological and non-representational status of a precarious ecology in art, and the compelling generosity of wonder within imagination. In recent years, some political theorists have suggested that the transnational labour markets of the global economy have shifted such that we now no longer have a mass \textit{proletariat}, but a mass \textit{precariat}, a pool of low-paid, insecurely employed and highly mobile, global workers and transnational economic migrants.\textsuperscript{17} The precarious state in which this global non-elite labour force exist is widely condemned and, I would argue, rarely connected to the increasing insecurity and mobility of an elite global labour force in the form of, for example, international artists, architects, designers, academics, corporate executives, IT specialists and other high-level ‘consultants’.

These two groups of ‘cosmopolitans’ share their ‘precarious’ experience of globalisation, but clearly are divided by their economic status and the power differentials this brings. Finding ways to articulate both the high and low status experiences of the precarious nature of production within a global economy sets out the possibility of a fuller and richer cosmopolitan conversation that brings together elite and non-elite cultural exchange. I want to suggest that this is one of the possibilities of art-making as world-making, though I am not suggesting here that the international contemporary art-world is universally accessible. What I am suggesting is that art as world-making permits a space

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\item \textsuperscript{16} Judith Butler makes a similar point concerning the political valence of the term ‘precarity’ which is more precisely demonstrative of economic, social and cultural disempowerment (non-elite status) than ‘precariousness’. See Butler, J. 2009, \textit{Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?} London, Verso, pp. 25–32. In addition, I would argue that it is not just a coincidence that wonder has also had ‘elite’ and ‘non-elite’ versions over its long history. See Marr, A. 2006, ‘Introduction’, in R. J. W. Evans and A. Marr (eds), \textit{Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment}, London, Ashgate, pp. 1–20, 15–16.
\item \textsuperscript{17} See Standing, G. 2011, \textit{The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class}, London, Bloomsbury.
\end{itemize}
to open that can enable new forms of public engagement to emerge, encourage
dialogues and, moreover, suggest strategies of creative intervention within a
range of different communities.\(^{18}\)

Delineating the cosmopolitan project of art’s world-making through the idea
of ‘precarious ecologies’ is a deliberate strategy. As explored above through
close attention to the material qualities of the works of Bertola and Brassil, a
precarious ecology is not envisaged here as a fixed or bounded entity—it is not
a thing, but a process or a state of relations between subjects, objects and their
environment. This is significant both in terms of the concept of cosmopolitanism
that it underpins and as it reiterates the agency of art as a world-making practice,
rather than a representation of the world.

The former point undoes teleology; in envisaging cosmopolitanism as a process
of world-making, rather than an end-point, we open the term and the inter-
related fields of politics, ethics and aesthetics, to change and development over
time. This way of thinking through a cosmopolitan project allows its becoming
to remain one of its key features—we never simply arrive. These insights in
turn mobilise what philosopher Edward Casey called the ‘possibilising’\(^{19}\) force
of imagining, imagination’s potential to provide a locus for the emergence of
new and different thought. As a precarious ecology, cosmopolitanism is neither
predetermined in content, nor in form; instead, it is understood as a carefully-
poised system of relationships that are open to difference, managed through
intersubjective generosity and negotiation with others, and constantly changing
as the material constraints of the environment evolve. They are risky but worth
it.

Art-making as world-making in the stronger sense of materialising these
precarious ecologies, does not image the cosmopolitan, but enables imagination
to play a critical part in its articulation. Art is thus not a mirror of the world (a
representation of the world), but a constituent component in its perpetual re-
making, a component whose materiality and affective agency are paramount.
Hence, I am not seeking in my exploration of contemporary art to find
specific works that are ‘about’ cosmopolitan ideas, or that paint a picture of a

\(^{18}\) I am very aware of art’s embeddedness within the systems of global capital and am not suggesting
that art provides a utopian space accessible equally to all. However, it would be mistaken to think that all
works of contemporary practice reside wholly within, for example, the space of the gallery, when much
work is now done in public, cooperative or community spaces and there are many works that seek out new
and different audiences, precisely to effect forms of communication that move beyond the ‘elite’ realms of
traditional ‘high culture’. On these issues, see for example, Kester, G. H. 2004, *Conversation Pieces: Community
and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

\(^{19}\) Casey, E. 2000, *Imagining: a phenomenological study*, [2nd edn], Bloomington, Indiana University Press,
pp. 5–12.
cosmopolitan world, but rather to ask how particular works (re)make worlds that open the possibility for the interpellation of cosmopolitan subject-positions and inter-relationships.

The third point in regard to the specificity of the argument being made here in relation to art as a world-making activity and the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism takes us back to wonder. Thus far we have explored the experience of wonder as one of the affective states that can be engendered through works of art that make precarious worlds and it has been suggested that these worlds and the subjects who engage with/in them are both changed by their encounter. I want to suggest that the connection with wonder becomes even more prescient when the possibilising force of imagination is placed into this mix, as it is, so strongly, in the case of the aesthetic openness of cosmopolitanism. To take this idea further, and bring the varied strands developed through this text together, it is useful to turn to a final work: *Speak Rhymes with Beak*, a sound installation piece from 2006 by Johanna Hällsten.

**Speaking Enchanting Rhymes**

*Speak Rhymes with Beak* consists of a three and a half-minute long sound loop, exhibited in gallery spaces accompanied by a log and bird seed. Approaching it, one is invited to light on the log and listen to the sounds of bird calls and human voices intermingled and played through a bell-speaker that focuses the sound, to immerse the listener within its sonic space. The simplicity of the materials—the log and seed—and the soft surround of the audio experience, entreat us gently to remain with the work as the sound runs its course.

The sound itself consists of three recorded elements: a bird that woke the artist each morning when she stayed at Wuhan University; Professor Chen Wangheng of Wuhan University, speaking the words ‘ni hao’ (hello), ‘saijian’ (goodbye) and ‘wo ai ni’ (I love you) in her dialect, in that order; and ambient sound of birds and noises taken from a garden in Tokyo. These elements were developed into a sonic dialogue by Hällsten, who used digital sound editing to make the morning bird calls ‘answer’ the human salutations in the sonic setting of the Japanese garden. Slowly, through the subtle manipulation of the sound, the voices of the bird and the woman begin to resonate in tone, pitch, timbre and rhythm, until they are ‘speaking’ to one another.

Viewed at <http://www.johannahallsten.com/>
Johanna Hällsten, 2006, *Speak Rhymes with Beak* (detail), Sound installation, log, bird seed.

Viewed at <http://www.johannahallsten.com/>

Hällsten, a Swedish-born artist living in the UK, frequently works in Asia and a number of her works have explored the problems and opportunities of translation, dialogue and cross-cultural (mis)communication. Derived from her own experiences of the linguistic challenges of working in China, *Speak Rhymes with Beak*, further extended its translative explorations to human and non-human communication. The woman speaking in the sound piece seeks to ‘teach’ the bird to speak Chinese; the bird responds, but their interaction is not unidirectional. Instead, it is mutual, as each intones toward and with the other, and each learns to speak a new, shared language that emerges between a Chinese dialect and birdsong. In the end, they intone ‘wo ai ni’ (I love you) together in their hybrid incantation.

*Speak Rhymes with Beak* is more directly related to the question of transnational dialogue and exchange than either *After the Fact* or *A Tether of Time*, and in that sense, the questions it raises for a cosmopolitan world-making in art might seem more obvious. Clearly, it suggests the possibility of a shared, mutual respect and engagement with difference and the possibility of finding spaces and means through which to communicate productively and generously with
others with whom we share the world. The work recognises those shared dialogues as mutually-transformative and connective; this is not a model of cultural imposition, where the dominant speaker’s language is ‘learned’ by the other so they can ‘communicate’.

But it is not the direct reference to translation or cross-cultural dialogue that makes Hällsten’s re-made world so fascinating within a broader discussion of the potential of art to create precarious, cosmopolitan, ecologies. I want to suggest that the affective dimensions of the work reiterate and extend its reach to incorporate the listener within its aural community of exchange. To hear the work requires the listener to settle on the log and be still, to enter into the space that is offered by the work quietly and attentively. The shift in tone in the sound piece is not audible unless we open ourselves to hearing it; it does not shout, it whispers. We are brought close to it, we are entangled with it.

In these phenomena we find again the state of wonder, of the new and extraordinary emerging through the everyday, arresting our attention, opening us to the pleasures of difference and changing us forever. The work is an entreaty, a precarious ecology that invites us to negotiate a new language and be surprised and delighted by the resonant refrain. It enchants.

In her book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, political theorist Jane Bennett argued eloquently for the power of wonder to compel generous ethical agency:

> Enchantment entails a state of wonder.... A state of openness to the disturbing, captivating elements in everyday experience.... More specifically, my contention is that enchantment can aid in the project of cultivating a stance of presumptive generosity (i.e., of rendering oneself more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies, and more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them).20

If the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism that are so wonderfully materialised by the world-making agency of contemporary art are to move beyond imagining the new toward ethical action in the world, it is perhaps by cultivating such a stance of generosity. It is not enough to call for an aesthetic of openness, or posit a predetermined and unchanging picture of a cosmopolitan future. To effect the precarious ecologies that enable us to recognise our interdependence with other human and non-human agents and to compel us to enter into connections with them as we share a world, we need to be able to find

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ways to explore and take pleasure in difference without being overwhelmed by it, or seeking to overwhelm others. Such generous intersubjectivity is precarious: risky, dependent upon the will of others and often fleeting.

*After the Fact*, *A Tether of Time*, and *Speak Rhymes with Beak*, each enable us to imaginatively inhabit the world re-made in and through wonder. In each case, as we experience the extraordinary breaking through the fabric of the ordinary, we are changed and our relations within the world are changed as well. The world is dust and it is astounding, the cosmos is everywhere singing, unheard, and it is possible to make strangers friends. We can inhabit the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism, but it is risky business.
Contemporaneous Traditions: The World in Indigenous Art/Indigenous Art in the World

Ian McLean

It may turn out … that going back can be a way to go forward.¹

Multiple Modernities

In the 1980s postmodernism’s retro culture was widely diagnosed as the endgame of modernism. Some suggested that a bigger endgame was in play. Hal Foster glimpsed the end of a ruling civilisation: ‘a moment when the West, its limit apparently broached by an all but global capital, has begun to recycle its own historical episodes’.² By the end of the century the West’s cultural hegemony did indeed seem over. From about 1990 global capital began delivering a completely deterritorialised contemporary art practice. Even Indigenous art, previously considered a primitive artifact of pre-modern times, was claimed (by a few) for contemporary art.³ This is one reason why Terry Smith believes that ‘Modernism’ and what he names ‘Contemporary Art’ are ‘different in kind’.⁴ Yet one thing did not change. Deterritorialised or not, modern, anti-modern, postmodern or contemporary, it is all the culture of capitalism.

Postmodern deterritorialisation coincided with the deterritorialisation of capital spearheaded by economic deregulation i.e., the surrender of nation-state regulation of capital to financial globalisation.⁵ Just as Marx and Engels had predicted in the Communist Manifesto, having used the West to subjugate the rest for the expansion of capital, capitalism now turned on Western nations.

¹ Berman, M. 1982, All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity, New York, Simon and Schuster.
Or as Slavoj Žižek described it, former colonial relations were globalised, so that today ‘there are only colonies, no colonising countries—the colonising power is no longer a Nation-State but directly the global company’.

These economic and cultural deterritorialisations were the culmination of postcolonial power arrangements that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. As capitalism globalised it changed its stripes from a site of antagonistic confrontation (with tradition, communism, the proletariat and the colonised) to the smooth invisible logic of the Real. Now, said Žižek, we face ‘the massive presence of capitalism as universal world system’, meaning that ‘everybody silently accepts that capitalism is here to stay.’ It follows, argued Žižek, that ‘the ideal form of ideology of this global capitalism is multiculturalism’, the attitude which, from a kind of empty global position, treats each local culture the way the coloniser treats colonised people—as “natives” whose mores are to be carefully studied and “respected”. That is to say, the relationship between traditional imperialist colonialism and global capitalist self-colonisation is exactly the same as between Western cultural imperialism and multiculturalism. A similar equation can be drawn between modernism (as the aesthetic expression of imperialist colonialism) and contemporary art (as the aesthetic expression of global capitalism). Whatever their different appearances, each is a theoretical object of capitalism.

One symptom of self-regulated or autonomous global capitalism (i.e., a capitalism no longer in need of the Western nation-state) was the erosion of Western hegemony. Before 1990 it appeared that modernity was ‘the result of forces largely internal to Europe’s history and formation’. Even postmodernism was then considered a Western phenomenon. In the early 1990s Stuart Hall could still confidently assert that the terms ‘modern’ and ‘Western’ were ‘virtually identical’. But by the end of the decade this was no longer the case. Charles Taylor bluntly announced in 1999 that ‘modernity is not specifically Western’. Current theories of modernity, argued Taylor, don’t account for ‘the multiple encounters of non-Western cultures with the exigencies of science, technology, and industrialization.’ ‘Instead of speaking of modernity in the singular’, he proposed ‘we should better speak of “alternative modernities”.’

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7 Žižek, ‘Multiculturalism’, p. 46.
8 Ibid., p. 44.
13 Ibid., p. 162.
The next year Shmuel Eisenstadt developed similar ideas into a cogent manifesto with the more arresting heading of ‘multiple modernities.’ This new narrative of multiple modernities is the master signifier of globalisation, and is rapidly reordering the critical landscape.

The impact of this new master signifier on the art-world is already profound, most obviously in the notion of ‘world art’. Further, as well as reshaping the present, master signifiers reshape the past. Now it increasingly seems that modernism was always global, multiple and divided, rather than Western and singularly formalist. ‘There are several versions of modernity’, said Nicolas Bourriaud at the end of the twentieth century, and it ‘cannot be reduced to a rationalist teleology’ i.e., formalism. Far from being ‘homogenic and hegemonic’, as it was conventionally thought, ‘from its beginnings’, wrote Eisenstadt, modernity was ‘beset by internal antinomies and structural contradictions’.

The new master signifier of multiple modernities also inverts earlier ideas of the West and progress. Now globalism reigns and tradition assumes the reformist role formerly reserved for the modern. This is why late-twentieth-century art is characterised by so many retro styles. Traditions are no longer negated or sublimated, as they were in the modernist myth of progress, but now shape the future. Foster observed:

In 1962 Ricoeur argued that to survive in it [the global culture of modernity] each culture must be grounded in its own indigenous tradition; otherwise this ‘civilization’ would be domination pure and simple. Similarly, in our own time Jürgen Habermas has argued that the modern West, to restore its identity, must critically appropriate its tradition.

Taylor observed the same strategy in other parts of the world: in wanting ‘to avoid the fate of those Aboriginal people who have been engulfed and made over by the external power’, non-Western societies are looking for creative adaptations that draw ‘on the cultural resources of their tradition’.

19 Ibid., p. 7.
21 Taylor, ‘Two Theories of Modernity’, p. 163.
However multiculturalism has its limits. The one zone in which the new master signifier of multiple modernities has hardly penetrated is Indigenous cultures, as if its differences are too great to be accommodated. Taylor and Eisenstadt ignore Indigenous cultures in their discussions. The widespread incomprehension of art historians and critics before Indigenous contemporary art remains a feature of art-world discourse. The incomprehension is evident in the most astute critics—such as Foster—as if here the new universal principle of global capitalism is held in suspension in case it disintegrates if applied to Indigenous art. Thus today Indigenous art is what Žižek called a ‘symptom’ rather than accepted as ‘typical’ or an example of the ‘concrete existence’ of the ‘Universal’ i.e., of global capitalism.  

While Indigenous artists working in Western-derived styles have been readily accepted into contemporary art-world discourse—their art meets the condition of global modernity—those working with traditional styles and subjects have not. Nevertheless the latter have had a profound impact on the global contemporary art-world. Foster called this impact the ‘ethnographic turn’, which he interpreted as a symptom of ethical malaise, diagnosing it as a return of avant-garde primitivism. His cynicism towards the former reflected his scepticism of the latter. Dismissing the ‘ethnographic turn’ as ‘primitivist fantasy’, he instead argued for an immanent critique, ‘a politics of here and now’, without appeal to some transcendent other. ‘A strategic sense of complex imbrication’, he wrote, ‘is more pertinent to our postcolonial situation than a romantic proposal of simple opposition’.

Foster was acutely aware that the ethnographic turn is just one of the many ‘complicated’ and ‘compulsive’ returns that characterise late twentieth-century art. The critical question today is, he argued, an ethical/political one:

How to tell the difference between a return of an archaic form of art that bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and a return to a lost model of art made in order to displace customary ways of working?

Foster judged the ‘ethnographic turn’ an example of the former. Further, he was referring to the Western reception of Indigenous art not Indigenous art itself. The latter remains invisible to his critical eye. When Foster wrote his essay in the early 1990s, Western Desert painting was especially prominent. A type of self-ethnography articulated from a conscious perspective of self-representation and self-determination in the postcolonial world, their art is nothing but a cultural politics of immanence—a point that Foster might have been expected

to notice. Instead such art remains beyond his critical eye, as if reduced to ethnographic objects. Indeed he was sceptical of their transformation into the category of art—or at least he was in 1985: ‘Though presented as art, the tribal objects are manifestly the ruins of (mostly) dead cultures’. In simultaneously placing Indigenous art outside and denying that there is an outside in the global economy, Foster effectively sublimates it twice. Here it is lodged like a virus in Western consciousness. Foster may have identified the ethnographic turn as a symptom, but he poorly diagnosed its pathology.

Inventing Indigenous Modernity

One consequence of the West’s sublimations is that it has never been indifferent to the rest. While Indigenous art was often dismissed as folk or primitive art, the sublimations that produced these judgments also lent Indigenous art the allure of the other. It became an object of desire. Modernism is noted for its restless anxiety about its constructions of otherness. This is particularly evident in the ways that the avant-garde seized upon the potential of the marginalised to desublimate the West’s sublimations.

The avant-garde’s initial turn to Indigenous art at the turn of the twentieth century followed on the heels of far reaching change in European attitudes to Indigenous cultures caused by the trope of social evolutionism which coincided with the rule of imperialist capitalism. Because social evolutionism held that cultures evolved, primitive cultures were seen to possess the key to the origins of modern ones. In an unexpected reversal, the very opposition that once excluded Indigenous art now privileged it. The virus had taken hold.

This post-Darwinian imbrication of the primitive and the modern in a social ecology—a habitus—provided anthropology with its guiding rationale as an academic discipline and science. From this point Indigenous art fell under the spell of a mysterious force that made it an increasingly seductive but also unmanageable object. Firstly, the methodological demands of the academy resulted in the intensive collection and scientific analysis of Indigenous material culture, stimulating Indigenous production for this new market and an academic interest in the material for its own sake. Soon it began to intrigue connoisseurs and from that point an emergent European modernism became closely bound to the aesthetic qualities of Indigenous art, inaugurating what is conventionally dubbed avant-garde primitivism. It has been a vital ingredient of twentieth-century modernism and arguably still is.

'The history of twentieth-century art', Bernard Smith observed, 'can be written in terms of primitivism.' This was unequivocally demonstrated in MoMA's 1984 exhibition, 'Primitivism in 20th Century Art'. The exhibition inadvertently revealed the extent to which European modernism is a form of retro-Indigenous art. This had enormous repercussions. Framed by an emerging postcolonial criticism, the art-world suddenly found itself knee deep in its own excrement, unleashing a torrent of moral accusations about the function of the primitive in modernism and the way in which formalism had repressed the Indigenous voice. The fallout was profound. The terms ‘primitive’ and ‘tradition’ became dirty words, and anti-formalist approaches in art theory and practice took hold, from abject art and the related reappraisal of modernism under the sign of George Bataille and the informal, to what Foster called the ‘ethnographic turn’ (discussed earlier). The latter was most spectacularly evident in the groundbreaking 1989 exhibition ‘Magicians of the Earth’—‘billed as the world’s first global art show’—in which works by contemporary Indigenous and Western artists were juxtaposed. By this time an emboldened few were touting Indigenous art as a contemporary art practice.

Such leaps of translation between Indigenous and Western art far exceeded the initial conceptual opposition between them, producing what one curator aptly called ‘a type of “intellectual vertigo”’. However cracks began to appear in the discourse well before the 1980s. An early sign, evident in the mid-twentieth century, was that non-Western art, including Indigenous art, gained a new official status as fine art on the condition that it remains true to its ethnic traditions. This emerging multiculturalism coincided with the growing crisis of imperialist capitalism. It was a small concession as intolerance towards non-Western art persisted when it looked Western i.e., modern. That is, Aborigines gained a visibility but only as primitives not moderns. In many respects the current reception of Indigenous art falls within this multicultural ethos of ethnic difference. Thus while Indigenous contemporary art is very visible in the

28 Foster, ‘The “Primitive” Unconscious’.
Australian contemporary art-world, it generally has been exhibited in separate gallery spaces. However, European museums of contemporary art, which are not sites of multiculturalism, have found it difficult to accommodate Indigenous art. Tate Modern is making concerted efforts to embrace the notion of multiple modernities in its exhibition programs but is yet to include Indigenous contemporary art, which remains relegated to the British Museum.

The same story continues across the Channel. In October 2012, ‘Aux sources de la Peinture Aborigine: Australie Tjukurrtjanu’—an exhibition of early paintings from the Western Desert contemporary art movement—opened at France’s premier ethnographic museum, the Musée du Quai Branly, which has become a site of multiculturalism, not its premier museum of modern and contemporary art, the Georges Pompidou Centre. At the time the latter featured an exhibition of the leading French contemporary artist Bertrand Lavier, which included some of his cast nickel-plated bronze replicas of the sort of Indigenous African sculpture popular with the French surrealists. This work, said Michel Gauthier, ‘questions the boundary between the fine arts museum and the ethnographic museum.’

The exhibition at the Quai Branly had the potential to question this boundary in a far more radical sense. Instead it is confirmed, not just because of the site—like the fine art museum, the ethnographic museum incorporates whatever objects it displays into its discourse—but also because the exhibition got caught in an ethnographic trap of its own making. In the first darkened room so-called traditional ethnographic objects were displayed, in contrast to the modern Indigenous paintings hanging on white walls in the other rooms like modern art. Wall text explains that these rare old artifacts show the iconographic sources of the modern acrylic paintings. In this way the old binary opposition between the modern and tradition is reiterated. The opportunity to invert this relationship—in the manner associated with Lavier—was not just missed but denied. If one looked closely the inversion was not difficult to find, as some of these supposedly rare old artifacts were made by artists in the exhibition, and made after their modern acrylic paintings hanging on the white walls. Tradition, as Foster predicted in 1985, was assuming a new agency in the contemporary world. This could have been the exhibition’s thesis, but its presentation confused the issue, positioning the contemporaneity of the acrylic paintings as a form of multiculturalism.

35 During the writing of this essay, two state art museums—South Australia, and New South Wales—integrated their Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian collections in significant ways. The Art Gallery of Western Australia did this several years earlier.
How then might we theorise what Fred Myers aptly characterised as the ‘conundrum of tradition’ in Indigenous contemporary art?  

**Neo-Traditionalism**

Postmodern critiques of the master-narratives of modernity have made most commentators wary of the word ‘tradition’, its apparent essentialism ‘conveying a timeless, unchanging past and the evil twin of modernity’.  

By contrast, the discourse of multiple modernities dispenses with this myth of Western progress and rehabilitates the notion of tradition. Without it modernity would not multiply.

The discursive function of tradition is well accepted, as is the idea that in the colonial era European authorities invented traditions for themselves and also for their colonial subjects. Further these invented traditions are self-evidently part of the Western discourse of modernity and especially its myth of progress. The myth of progress is actually a myth of Western progress and non-Western decline. The West construes its traditions within a linear progression between past, present and future, thus gaining agency through history. However it denies non-Western cultures this agency of tradition by inventing non-Western traditions in which this ‘axis of durée’—as Alfred Gell aptly dubbed it—is severed.

Thomas Spear, writing on colonial Africa, shows how both sides used traditionalism to ‘assert present interests in terms of the past’. It was, he said, ‘reinterpreted, reformed and reconstructed by subjects and rulers alike.’

Arguing for a more complex dialogical agency in which both sides employed discourses of tradition for their own purposes, he concluded that traditionalism was an ambivalent ‘perilous process that could both challenge and support colonial hegemony’.

Spear’s main point is that tradition is part of what he called ‘the ongoing politics of neo-traditionalism’ that shaped the ideology of colonial cultures. However, while neo-traditionalism is inventive, he cautioned against the belief that

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41 Spear, ‘Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits’, p. 4.
42 Ibid., p. 13.
43 Ibid., p. 4.
traditions are pure inventions. Rather, neo-traditionalism is ‘an autonomous and self-regulating process’ in which traditions are ‘continually renewed’. That is, the discourse has its own unpredictable agency. Hence:

when colonial authorities sought to appropriate [African] tradition they became subject to a discourse of which they had little knowledge or control. And when they sought to impose their own discourse, such as Christianity or democracy, they risked its appropriation [by the colonised] to challenge their own authority.45

Not only are Western and African thinking entangled, so too are the discourses of traditionalism, neo-traditionalism and modernism. Modernity seemingly becomes as much an invention of tradition as tradition is an invention of modernity. Either way, Spear casts the discourse of neo-traditionalism as an ideology of modernity. Indeed, the prefix ‘neo’ makes it a type of modernism and suggests the retro styles of postmodernism. And like the retro styles of postmodernism, much Indigenous contemporary art has a political agenda designed to leverage power in the postcolonial world. In accord with Spear’s analysis, the current discourse on Western Desert painting emphasises its use of traditional designs in new commercialised contexts,46 and the art’s stylistic affinity with Western modernism47 made it seem to some a type of postmodernism.48

However, the continuing prohibition of the term ‘tradition’ confirms its conventional role as a sublimated other and thus an object of desire. Indeed museums can’t resist the poetic frisson of its supposedly untranslatable terms. Typical is ‘Ancestral Modern’—the name of an exhibition of Aboriginal contemporary art at the Seattle Art Museum in 2012. No wonder Indigenous contemporary art largely waits in the wings while other non-Western contemporary art slowly but surely finds a place in art museums and a discourse once reserved for European modernists as the new face of multicultural cosmopolitan capitalism.

Theorising Indigenous Modernism

At stake in theorising Indigenous modernism is not the fact of modernity’s global reach, which is a given, but the nature of its relations. Take Marshall

44 Ibid., p. 6.
46 Bardon, G. 1979, Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert, Adelaide, Rigby.
48 Michaels, ‘Postmodernism, Appropriation’.
Berman’s influential *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982). It owes much to New Left critique of the 1960s and 70s, and quickly became a classic of its time. Berman argued that ‘modernity can be said to unite all mankind’. Cutting ‘across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology’, 49 modernity draws everyone into its orbit. This is, he reasoned, because of its psychological impact. In reaching into the very psyche of individuals, modernity imposes itself on all persons and all walks and aspects of life, from the concrete megapolis to the dusty streets of remote Aboriginal communities. No one escapes what we might (ironically) dub modernity’s universal multiculturalism.

Because Berman theorises modernity as primarily a psychological rather than social, political or economic formation, he minimises the significance of its different histories and their different social formations. 50 His modernity is homogenic and hegemonic, so much that only it, and not the traditions in which it operates, provides ‘modern men and women the power to change the world that is changing them’. 51 In such theorisations, as Taylor observed: ‘The march of modernity will end up making all cultures look the same. This means of course, that we expect they will end up looking Western.’ 52 In other words, wherever it appears modernity is, to use a neo-Darwinian metaphor, the replication of a singular genotype. While this might explain how Indigenous cultures were modernised, the explanation is not a theory of Indigenous modernity as it denies that there is anything Indigenous about it.

If Berman understands modernity as a genotype, an information set, the theory of multiple modernities argues that it is expressed in highly plastic phenotypes, each shaped by its habitus. According to Taylor and Eisenstadt there are many different expressions of modernity because there are many different traditions and social environments in which they form. Here modernity is not an ideal that replicates particular versions of itself. A more apt metaphor is Jameson’s suggestion that capitalism is like a virus. 53 It implies that modernity infects various bodies or traditions that in turn produce their own distinctive antibodies. Subject to a type of adaptive immune response by the infected culture or tradition, the virus of modernity is thus reshaped into a compatible form. These counter-modernities are, in effect, highly plastic types of modernities.

If imagined as a virus, modernity is an information set (distinguished by rationalised or self-ordering processes) that originated in Europe—or maybe

in its interactions with other cultures—but with a global vector that harnesses the reproductive machinery of host cultures in a systemic and transforming fashion.

The variability of traditions means that modernity has had different consequences for different people at different times. Certainly its relations of power have never been equal, and whatever the common thread of its narratives, its outcomes have been manifold. Modernisation has been experienced as a narrative of liberation but also one of destruction and despair. Nevertheless Indigenous Australians have, like all other peoples of the world, made from the modernity infecting them specific local modernities of their own. And they have been making these local modernities since the beginning of the colonising process. There are long histories of Indigenous modernisms and they are global in scope.

A Global History of Indigenous Modernity

Jameson observed that shifts in capitalism over the centuries lack any teleology or design. They are, he said, characterised by unpredictable dialectical reversals, ‘whereby winners lose and losers sometimes win’. Comparing their workings to ‘a kind of virus’, he argued that their ‘development is something like an epidemic’ or ‘fire’ that burns itself out or leaps ‘to new and more propitious settings, in which the preconditions are favorable to renewed development’.

This is evident if we analyze the cultural impact of globalisation and its role in the formation of Indigenous modernity. When Goethe first broached the idea of a ‘world literature’ in the early nineteenth century, his thinking reflected the Enlightenment’s universalising discourse and the impact on him of non-Western literature and contemporary voyages of discovery in which enlightenment was sought not in the grand tour of Italian monuments and classical ruins, but a much grander scientific tour of the world. When in the mid-nineteenth century Marx took up Goethe’s idea he reconfigured a similar habitus into quite a different image, namely the imperialism of world empires, predicting that because ‘the bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country’, ‘national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
world literature. Yet within a century of Marx writing this the world empires had collapsed and nation states were the principal habitus of modernity and the main agent of globalisation.

In the age of world empires modernity was a triumphal European procession before which other nations could only kneel and Indigenous ones succumb. By contrast, with the emergence of the nation state and its discourse of modernism, Indigenous art entered into a new relationship with the state, acquiring a status disproportionate to its peripheral power. This is because Indigenous art added something vital to the centre. In Europe it was an essential ingredient of Cubism and Surrealism. In Australia Indigenous culture remains a central ingredient in the emerging nation state’s articulation of a national identity. This was also often the case in other former colonies as each sought to consolidate its rule as an independent postcolonial nation state. How can we understand this development? What occurred in the movement from the modernity of world empires to that of the nation state that catapulted Indigenous art from oblivion to fetish?

Firstly, when in the second half of the nineteenth century European modernists sought to re-invent their neo-classical inheritance in the heroism of the streets, they were generally disappointed to discover a troubling lack. By the turn of the twentieth century Indigenous art was becoming a substitute for this lack, providing the model for a resistant modernism. One nostalgia, and with it one universal, was traded for another. Indigenous aesthetic values—as European modernists perceived them—displaced neo-classicism as the ideal, providing twentieth-century modernism with its characteristic style. By the inter-war years Indigenous art had assumed the figure of the universal.

Secondly, the pervasive power of the nation state brought Indigenous cultures into a new alliance with modernity and capitalist relations. Tim Rowse points out that the Australian nation state replaced policies of coercion and protection that characterised the rule of empire (or capitalist imperialism) with ones that regulated Aboriginal livelihood at a micro level. Rowse had in mind Foucault’s notion of modern power, which rather than rule through the sovereign’s naked authority, infiltrates the daily routines of its citizens by distributing power in a measured way around the putative norms of modernity and capitalism. This moment of transition, says Rowse, was more or less in place by the 1940s.

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Through its assimilation processes the nation state both demanded far more from and promised far more to Indigenous populations than the world empires ever did. Assimilation is not a one-way process in which a more powerful centre simply incorporates a weaker periphery. Rather it also provides new opportunities for Indigenous people to make from modernity and capitalism something of their own. Indeed, distinguishing the modernity of the nation state from that of world empires is the extent to which local Indigenous art shaped the identity discourses of the state, thus providing an opening for Indigenous artists to become modernists. By the mid-twentieth century a few Indigenous artists such as the Australian Albert Namatjira (1902–59) and the American George Morrison (1919–2000) were successfully working within the arena of nation state modernism.

Understanding Morrison’s art as a type of modernism is relatively easy. Born and raised on the Chippewa Grand Portage Indian reservation, Morrison studied at the Minnesota School of Art and, after winning a travelling scholarship, at the Art Students League in New York from 1943–46. In 1952 a Fulbright scholarship financed his study in Paris. Part of the Abstract Expressionist group in New York, for most of his career he had teaching positions at various art schools and universities.

Namatjira’s career was very different, but understanding his art as a type of modernism is also relatively easy. Born and raised on the Finke River mission in remote central Australia, in 1936 he began painting with the regional modernist Rex Battarbee. Battarbee was part of the national landscape school of painting, which played a central role in developing a distinctive Australian national identity in the years after World War I. Namatjira quickly developed a strong following. He is, with Hans Heysen, the most admired practitioner of this national landscape school.

At the time Namatjira and Morrison were considered modernist artists of Indigenous descent but not makers of Indigenous art. Then Indigenous art was highly visible and popular in Australia and the USA, but as a form of ethnic art, not as a form of modernism. By trading the ethnicity of their art for Western cosmopolitanism, the critical reception of their art preserved the myths of the West and progress that regulated the twentieth-century understanding of modernity. However, the exchange was never neat or transparent, either with artists, the critics or the public. Neither artist, Namatjira especially, fully escaped the hand of multiculturalism.

The colonised generally won their freedoms through forming their own nation states. The exception is Indigenous groups. Denied a place in a world ruled by nation states, recognition of Indigenous autonomy and rights as modern subjects has been late in coming and primarily occurred under the sign of
globalisation, post-nationalism and postmodernity.60 This transitional period is shaping a new meta-narrative of world art that comprises multiple currents of art practice—including Indigenous ones—that are challenging the discourses of multiculturalism.61 Whether this is a new epidemic or, as Jameson suggests, the final deterritorialisation of the modernity of the nation state,62 it has given Indigenous cultures a new visibility in the world as contemporary art. One sign of this new visibility and shifting power of Indigenous cultures is the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2007 by the United Nations (UN). The Declaration primarily sought to clarify the rights of Indigenous people in relation to those of the nation state. At stake are contested territories, contested world views and different experiences of modernity.

In 2007 the UN estimated that there were 370 million Indigenous inhabitants of the world (though a fraction of the world’s population between them they speak the majority of the 7000 odd languages spoken in the world today). Their territories are found in every continent, but there are no Indigenous nation states. Indigenous nations and territories are ruled by nation states that have been the main vectors of modernity and agents of Indigenous disenfranchisement. Indigenous nations are within and sometimes across several nation states. Thus for them modernity has not been experienced simply in terms of citizenship and national identity. At first denied participation in its processes, when they did finally win citizenship rights they refused to surrender their ancestral identities, which is the usual Faustian bargain of citizenship. Instead many Indigenous people sought to negotiate a path between the modernity of the nation state and their ancestral identities—identities that are simultaneously traditional and contemporary—a vernacular cosmopolitanism. Such art is exemplary of what Spear called ‘neo-traditionalism’—a discourse that in asserting present interests in terms of ‘an axis of durée’ establishes itself within a history, within a continuity between past, present and future ‘from which’, as Gell says, an ‘artist’s personhood and agency can be abducted’.63 Neo-traditionalism is a means of countering the myth of Western progress that denied Indigenous agency. Seizing the past for the present has as its prize the future and ultimately identity and power, but it remains to be seen if this Indigenous strategy, which on the face of it seems to play into the hand of multiculturalism, can in fact go beyond it.

61 Smith, ‘Currents Of World-Making’.
62 Jameson, ‘Culture and Finance Capital’.
63 Gell, Art and Agency.
Making Worlds: Art, Words and Worlds

Jen Webb and Lorraine Webb

Introduction

‘The world’ seems, often, to be more a proposition than a place, more a theory than a thing-in-itself. The fluidity of its meanings means that the dominant discourse tends to focus on the conceptual, the economic and the political, rather than on lived experience, phenomenological encounters, or the multiple ways of being in what each person might consider ‘the world’. How we might access the plural experience of the world is a point of considerable scholarly debate as philosopher Nelson Goodman notes, writing that ‘universes of worlds as well as worlds themselves may be built in many ways’.¹ We start from Goodman’s constructivist premise, and focus on art as a domain for the making of worlds. Art is perhaps under-determined compared with linguistic and political mediums, but it may have equally profound effects on how lived worlds emerge and are understood. In this paper we take up the twin concepts of plurality and practice to explore how art might enable an exploration of connectivities and differences, and how it might form a venue for the making of worlds that are not fully in accord with contemporary logics and ‘truths’. We do this through a discussion of a recent exhibition that was framed around the theme of ‘making worlds’, and mounted in a small regional city in New Zealand, Whanganui. It included the work of seven artists² whose common point of connection is that town—one of the oldest colonial towns in New Zealand, and a fountainhead for indigenous rights protests within Aotearoa. The artists’ connection with this liminal town, and their separate experiences and identifications, serve to highlight the ways in which visual art can afford the place to situate oneself: whether a geographical or an ontological place. From such places they can produce and present their works to un-make and re-make the known, authorised world—to allow new conceptual frameworks and, possibly, new grounds for human connectivity.

² See Appendix for biographical information on the artists: Chaco Kato, Lily Aitui Laita, Kate Lepper, Faith McManus, Helen Manning, Kura Te Waru Rewiri and Lorraine Webb.
Art and the World

‘Art is not a copy of the real world. One of the damn things is enough’

The relationship between art and the world is something discussed frequently by artists and art critics. At conferences, in artist talks and in critical writings it is not uncommon to come across discussion about whether art reflects the world, represents it, replicates it or re-makes it. We aimed to add to this discussion but focus on the making of the world. To do this, we mounted an exhibition titled ‘Making Worlds’ (27 June–23 July 2011). We invited a group of artists to show works that in some way reflect their sense of art and world; and interviewed them to tease out what they see as the connection between art and world.

Our starting point for this exercise was the philosopher Nelson Goodman, who several decades ago published the influential *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), a text that lays the foundation for so much thinking about world-making that has happened since. Goodman analyses the relationship between the domain of art and social understandings of ‘the world’. Drawing on the writing of earlier philosophers, including Ernst Cassirer and William James, he engages questions of ‘the multiplicity of worlds, the speciousness of “the given”, the creative power of the understanding, the variety and formative function of symbols’ in order to ask the following questions: ‘What are worlds made of? How are they made? What role do symbols play in the making? And how is world-making related to knowing?’

These are questions that engage us also: in particular, the possible relationship between world-making and knowing; and the creative power of the understanding as each applies to art and to artists. In this paper we discuss the outcome of the process—of conceiving and mounting the exhibition, interviewing the artists, and undertaking archival and observational research into the issue of whether, or how, particular artists build worlds, imagine worlds, and find ways to live in and across those worlds.

The artists we selected for this exhibition and for the question of art and world are painters, printmakers, installation artists and sculptors. Their cultural backgrounds include New Zealand (Maori and Pakeha), Japan, Samoa, Britain, South Africa and Croatia, and they now mainly reside in New Zealand, Australia or the United Kingdom. Their only real point of connection is the Quay School of the Arts in Whanganui. The wide range of ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds, and of art practices, provided us the opportunity to test

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perceptions of world held by people who share a position in the field of art, but otherwise occupy very different positions. The fact that these artists have only limited shared experiences suggests that they are likely to have distinctive approaches to the topic of the exhibition, and to what it means to make art/make worlds.

Not surprisingly, their responses to questions of world and world-making are somewhat idiosyncratic, reflecting differences of culture and/or differences in the traditions of making in which they practice. The painters, for example, seem to have a sense of ‘world-making’ that is different from the installation artists; the artists with an indigenous cultural identity articulate a sense of ‘world’ and of world-and-art that is different from the other artists. The artists also use different conceptual frames for the idea of ‘world’, referring variously to world-as-system, world-as-illusion, world-as-body and world-as-space; and describing world-making variously as contributions to a living system, a way of integrating dream-states or of crafting connections, and a practice that provides opportunities to learn about the lived environment.6

But there are homologies across their answers too: homologies that seemed to us to be predicated on their mutual investment in the discourses and values of the world of art. None, for instance, claimed to be directly engaged with the geopolitical world, or to be consciously attempting to change it; and none claimed to be making a world that is potentially habitable by others. Rather, they all, to varying degrees, suggest that if art makes world, the world it makes is a private one. The making of art enables a space in which they can operate, can explore the things that matter to them, and can feel ‘at home’. Though they come from very different backgrounds, work in different forms and have different sets of interests and imperatives—though, in short, their worlds are very different—they hold in common a sense of the importance of space/place and an enduring investment in the work of making art.

Their answers provide a fruitful line of thought about the work of (some) art and artists in relation to the construction of (an idea of) world: mainly in terms of how an individual artist not only inhabits a space, but also creates a sense of world as a way of seeing, making and living ethically. Their notions of ‘world’ are, moreover, in line with much philosophical thought about art and world: art-making and world-making, we will argue in the paper, share some important properties. Each has a physical form and yet is highly conceptual; each resides in abstraction but manifests in materiality; each is inchoate, but directed towards organisation through form; and each starts from a point of blindness and seeks

6 All references to artists’ comments come from a series of recorded conversations and email exchanges we held with the artists during 2011 and 2012. We do not refer directly to Lorraine Webb’s comments because, as one of the authors of this paper, her position is already embedded in the text.
to achieve the visible. Because of this, we focus on art as something that both shapes and manifests such understandings of the world and its possibilities, and hence as something that is integral to the work of shaping and manifesting the idea of ‘world’.

### What is World?

The concept of ‘world’ and world-making informs a discussion that has been explored throughout Western philosophy. From Plato arguing for the co-presence of two worlds, the sensible and the allegorical; through Heidegger’s account of simultaneously shared and different worlds; and to David Lewis arguing for ‘modal realities’ and the existence of ‘possible worlds’, philosophers have consistently engaged the problem of what ‘the world’ means to us.

Their definition of the word ‘world’ does not refer to the planet, or to geopolitical arrangements, but to domains of practice and of discourse. Goodman uses ‘world’ in this sense, referring for instance to the ‘worlds’ of art and science, rather than conceiving ‘world’ as the planet on which we live. This is etymologically sound: the word ‘world’ comes from a combination of the Old English *wer* (man) and *eld* (age), which draws attention not to the physical globe, but to the human domain, the lived and the experiential. World as ‘the age of man [sic]’ is not a concrete ‘thing’ but an abstract space, a space of possibility. As the ‘ages’ pass, and as human societies change, so too does the world change. This implies that built into the word ‘world’ is a sense of mutability, plurality and plasticity. So, as Goodman argues, ‘world’ is conceptual rather than concrete, something that is ‘built in many ways’ rather than given to us in established form. Of course the world-as-planet comes to us *a priori*, with its own concrete reality; and no amount of lived experience will negate the effects of a cyclone or an earthquake, or undo the power of the laws of physics. But the cyclone, the earthquake and the laws of physics are also ‘built in many ways’, in that human understandings of what they are, how they work and what they mean are predicated on cultural rather than material knowledge: articulated and accounted for by modes of representation. We cannot access the physical world immediately, because knowledge of any external thing is ‘indirect, in that it is mediated by the ideas,

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11 We draw here on the long line of twentieth century theorists whose work analyses the relationship between materiality and meaning: including Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Cassirer and Lyotard. This perspective does not refute the material presence of the world of things, but rather indicates the limited extent to which human beings can access the world of things, mediated as it is by language and signification.
which are as it were clues to, or evidence for, the external things that act on our senses';¹² and these ideas are experienced and articulated through the mediation of systems of signification.

**Perception and Conception**

Because of this, Goodman argues, there cannot be

> perception without conception.... Although conception without perception is merely empty, perception without conception is blind (totally inoperative).... We can have words without a world but no world without words or other symbols.¹³

Like the Old English *wer-eld*, his is a world predicated on signification and representation. We might dispute Goodman’s claim that we can have words without a world—in what environment would they circulate?—but he is on solid philosophical ground when he insists that there cannot be a ‘world without words’; that is to say, there cannot be a world *for us*: there cannot be an ‘age of man’, or a way of grasping and rendering the experiential qualities of being, without symbolic representation and communication.

Goodman’s conception seems to be reflected in some of the comments made by the artists in the exhibition. Chaco Kato, for instance, makes the point that although sculpture is about the concrete because it requires the artist to deal with physical issues (such as gravity), and to manipulate physical materials, it is also highly abstract. This is not only because, for Chaco, the work typically begins with an idea, but also because as a professional artist she finds it important to see a visual form as information, rather than as something ‘real’ that needs to be reproduced as an art object. She notes:

> Amateur artists tend to gather the ‘what is’ of the object and reproduce it, rather than going through the process of deconstructing the thing they’re looking at, analyzing that information, and then recreating or reconstructing the information. Get away from direct representation; think about the components; look at each element. This is worldmaking: when you don’t take the world as it is presented to you, but you engage with it and its components, and make something very new.

This is a highly symbolic and representational approach to art and to the world: seeing it as discrete packages of potential, coding and framing it, and producing a communicative object from that process.

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Kura Te Waru Rewiri is a painter who works very much with symbolic forms—such as the Kowhaiwhai patterns of traditional Maori art—rather than producing direct images of ‘what is’. She identifies herself as an abstract thinker, saying that ‘Even when I think about figurative work, I break the shapes up to abstract’; and she begins by thinking about colour, and light and dark, rather than (in the first instance) about the material world in front of her. This approach to work, and the expressionistic, often sombre abstracts she paints that acknowledge the presence and mana of ancestors, and the mauri (life force) of the land, locate her as an artist who relies on conception for her perception.

A Different Point of View

While both Chaco and Kura identify the importance of abstract thinking and signification, both are also—like the other artists in this exhibition—deeply connected to the material of art and art-making, as fluent in discussing the physical properties of their practice and their sense of world as they are in discussing analysis. Both points of view are equally valid, because the abstract and the material, the plastic and the concrete, are implicated in how human beings create a world, or a sense of world, and inhabit it.
While Goodman’s views have some very compelling elements, a different perspective on the work of world-making and of art appeared in the literature about a decade after Goodman’s *Ways of Worldmaking*, when George Steiner produced his *Real Presences* (1978). This text traverses similar terrain—how human beings create a world, or the sense of world, through creative practices and creative artifacts—though it has a very different starting point. Where Goodman identifies the creative possibilities inherent in the disconnect between the physical and the conceptual, Steiner identifies a lack in society brought about by what he terms the ‘break of the covenant between word and world’, or between worlds as such—concrete places—and ‘worlds’, or discursive spaces. For Goodman, and for many twentieth century thinkers, this ‘break’ instantiates creative possibilities. The proliferation of meanings, the slipperiness of language and the loss of belief in a transcendent referent which mean that the word ‘world’ means nothing, in fact allow it to mean almost anything, providing us opportunities to build worlds. But for Steiner, it means we need to ‘learn anew what is comprised within a full experience of created sense’, and to recover a sense of real reality—which, for him, means the apprehension of the presence of God. For Goodman, worlds are present to us because we make them; for Steiner, the only reason we can make worlds is because there is, behind our experiential being, a ‘real presence’ that enables such representational acts. It is God’s presence that underpins our creative and world-making work, Steiner insists, writing that ‘There is language, there is art, because there is “the other”’. For Goodman, we keep making and un-making, ‘taking apart and putting together’ in order to organise objects and ideas in ways that will create ‘real’ experiences; for Steiner, reality is already there in the ‘necessary possibility’ of God’s presence which we encounter in the making and consumption of aesthetic objects. So, while Goodman’s model starts from a possibility that permits the making of (contingent) actualities, Steiner’s model starts from an actuality that permits the making of (contingent) possibilities.

Both writers are concerned to understand the relationship between ‘word and world’ (Steiner) or ‘words and worlds’ (Goodman). Both writers identify art as an important site for the testing of their ideas though each focuses on language and literary arts rather than on visual art. Each also takes a rather limited perspective on the topic. Goodman, for example, shows little appreciation of phenomenology, history or media in his account of how worlds are made, and overextends his argument that ‘world’ effectively means little more than domain.

15 Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 4.
16 Ibid., p. 137.
18 Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 3.
We can agree that human beings apprehend ‘the world’—the physical globe—through the mediation of symbolic systems, but the natural world certainly impresses itself on us. Steiner’s reliance on the transcendental domain, and his determination to build on a notion of the divine, cannot be substantiated in a discursive economy that relies on evidence and argument; and his concern that world has been betrayed by word relies on an unsustainable premise.20

While we may agree that world and word are separated by a great gulf, and that worlds are discursive formations, there is more to it than that. ‘The world’ may be more a proposition than a place, more a theory than a thing-in-itself, but the focus of so much discourse on the conceptual, the economic and the political, means that the lived experience of groups and individuals is often left out of the equation. Both Goodman and Steiner also tend to leave out of the equation that fact that we do, after all, live in a physical environment, and that while our engagement with it is deeply mediated by discourse, we are—as the many recent natural disasters have reminded us so tragically—entirely reliant upon the planet that is (also) our world. Actuality, the thing that evades linguistic finality, continually works on us, changing us even as we change it, and it is the intersection of the actual, material world, and the representational, discursive worlds, that demands attention. Karl Marx, writing in 1867, raises this issue, reminding readers that human beings cannot in fact remain outside the material world.21 We interact with the material world through our labour; we shape the world, and it in turn shapes us because labour is, for Marx, ‘a process by which man [sic], through his own actions, mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism between himself and nature...he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature’.22 But despite this close association between humans and nature, Marx reminds us, humans are always distinguished from the rest of the world because we possess the faculty of imagination:

a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds his cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.23

This comparison allows us to move outside Steiner’s language-based perspective of the world. It is of course in language that arguments are most explicitly mounted and undertaken, and knowledge is most precisely conveyed.

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20 Derrida J. 1974, Of Grammatology trans. Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, makes the point that transcendental logic relies on an emptiness, and yet comes with considerable authority. There is, Derrida observes, a longing for presence and for a centre that is manifested in the sort of reliance on the impossible that Steiner’s position encapsulates.


22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., p. 284.
Art is perhaps under-determined compared with the linguistic medium. But our concern is not with the relative fluency of visual or linguistic media, and more with the question of how imagination and representation work together to conjure worlds. Whether in visual art or in language, they can have profound effects on how lived worlds emerge and are understood; and art, because of its comparative muteness, is capable of connecting at an embodied rather than abstracted level, touching its viewers and its makers.

This embodied connectedness is a feature of much art, and one of the artists in the exhibition, Kate Lepper, speaks very directly about it. Kate’s practice is conceptually grounded on the notion of autopoiesis, and particularly the idea of the ‘living system’ that she draws from the writings of Fritjof Capra.\textsuperscript{24} She reads this as providing a conceptual distinction between process and structure, with structure being the effect of a process that happened in the past, and process happening in the present being directed to a structure in the future. This principle of practice means on the one hand that her work is not deliberately designed, but rather something that emerges out of the interaction between its elements, its content and its contexts. On the other hand, her work is deeply imbued with thought about the responsibility involved in the making of a future, and about consciousness of the fact that, as she writes, ‘All material is riddled with the myriad trajectories that enable it to come into being. My aim is to become aware of these trajectories’.

In this regard, it is possible to see Kate’s work as part of a way of thinking that belongs not only to the Capra logic of living systems, but also from earlier points of view. We can refer here to Marx, of course, and his conception of the inevitable imbrication of the human in the natural world; and also of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘organic thought’,\textsuperscript{25} the thought that begins not from the distance of reason, but from the proximity of interconnection. Merleau-Ponty writes, ‘The world is not what I think, but what I live through’,\textsuperscript{26} a corrective to Goodman’s and Steiner’s perhaps overly discursive view of worlds and world-making. What art-making can make evident, in this ‘conversation’, is that human beings are both part of and separate from the natural world; both makers and destroyers of worlds; and always shaped by the world even as we shape it.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. xviii.
Exhibition view, left to right: Kate Lepper, 2011, *Leaf Preservers* (Albers), Re-used plastic bags, elastic, plastic buckles and adjusters, zip, Radiata Pine needles, variable dimensions; Kate Lepper, 2011, *Leaf Preserver* (Backpack Prototype), Re-used plastic bags, found fabric, strapping, plastic buckles, zip, mixed autumn leaves, variable dimensions; Chaco Kato, 2010–2011 (ongoing), *Endless Days, Borderless World* (section), Mixed media on paper, variable size.

Courtesy Lorraine Webb

**Bridging the Gap**

Goodman, Steiner and Marx are all very significant players in this field, but it is worth observing that none are visual artists. Goodman is a philosopher who was for some time an art dealer, Steiner is specifically invested in the literary arts as writer and critic and Marx a scholar of the social sciences. This does not vitiate the quality of their investigations into, or observations of, the work of art, but it does mean that their capacity to speak with authority about the process of making is less secure. In this section we turn to the perspectives of writers who are also visual artists, specifically John Berger, who provides something of a bridge between the related but contradictory positions on art and world offered by Goodman and Steiner, and the more phenomenological perspective offered by Marx and by Merleau-Ponty.
In a ‘conversation’ with the art historian James Elkins published in Berger on Drawing (2005), John Berger describes drawing in a way that encompasses human imagination, the actuality of the material world, and the possibility of the other, or the transcendent. Drawing is, he writes, ‘a way of addressing the absent, of making the absent appear’, a definition that seems to allow the possibility of something like Steiner’s model of the transcendent. But then he continues, describing drawing as ‘the place where blindness, touch and resemblance come together’.

This second depiction seems closer to the work of world-making as Goodman conceives it: as using the techniques of signification and symbolisation, along with ‘the creative power of the understanding’, to make a contingent ‘real’. At the same time it reflects Merleau-Ponty’s and Marx’s phenomenological accounts of the physical world—expressed here through ‘touch’—as being integral to the production of symbolic representation.

This is a perspective presented by several of the artists in our exhibition. Helen Manning, a graduate of the Quay School of the Arts in painting who has more recently been working in contemporary sculpture, in some ways rehearses Berger’s point about touch, connections and resemblances. She describes her process of making as ‘drawing in space’, and for her it does in fact ‘make the absent appear’ because of the representational shapes that emerge from her making and thinking. The starting point is a period of creating netting from ‘individual circles of stitching which connect to each other’, and through this, she writes, ‘my work evolves into figurative pieces’. The heads, and the whole bodies, that have emerged from this process reflect not only the fairytales that mobilise her thinking, but also the ‘blindness’ (working in the abstraction of thread and netting), the ‘touch’ (work made through a long repetitive process) and the ‘resemblance’ (to the human form and to fairytale characters) that Berger identifies as being at the heart of drawing.

This conception of drawing analogises the work of world-making because it draws attention to the imperative to know, and to find ways of knowing through making. Whether we conceive of ‘the absent’ as Steiner’s presence of God, or as Goodman’s ‘worlds already on hand’, this absence is the foundation of the worlds created through art, because it is the formal skill, technical ability, cultural ways of knowing and personal investment in representation that come together to generate human understandings of an idea of the world. The absent and abstract ideas of world cannot be effective unless they are made concrete; so the work of art-as-world-making brings together ‘blindness’ (unknowing), ‘touch’ (where the abstract becomes ‘real’), and resemblance (a likeness to what is already known, so that the new can be apprehended). This is never a

28 Goodman, Ways of Worldmaking, p. 5.
29 Ibid., p. 6.
finished work, though. For Berger, ‘Drawing is a ceaseless process of correction. It proceeds by corrected errors’;\textsuperscript{30} and for Goodman, ‘making is a remaking’\textsuperscript{31} because the worlds we make are incomplete, partial and contingent. Therefore the world as humans perceive it—the ‘age of man’—is constantly being (re) made, by various forces and acts, in various ways.

\textbf{Helen Manning, 2011, \textit{The Narrators}, Machine embroidery, thread and mixed media, 25 x 14 x 20 cm.}

Courtesy Lorraine Webb

\textsuperscript{30} Berger, \textit{Berger on Drawing}, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{31} Goodman, \textit{Ways of Worldmaking}, p. 6.
However, it is not the responsibility of art to generate knowledge or understandings; its first imperative is art, and for the artists in our exhibition, the knowledge or understanding generated by their practice was conceived as something quite personal and internal: the making of worlds for, or of, the self. This does not need to imply a solipsistic view of world-making; as Faith McManus says, ‘I like the idea that you can take stories that are very particular and share them—there are things that run through everything we do that other people can and do understand’. Faith describes her work as exploring the points
of connection between ancestry, myth and culture. This involves another kind of bridge-crossing: between the abstract/ephemeral and the concrete/material. She says:

I need lots of dreamtime to make work, and some of my work has come to me in dreams, some has gone away in dreams. I suppose I think of the world we live in as a dream as opposed to reality; this world is illusion and dream, and I suppose that there is a real world elsewhere. I try to make that world in my work, and when I work, that’s the world I enter.

This could be read as a commitment to a Steiner-esque transcendence, but it is more than that: it is a world that emerges from the self, from personal and family history, and from reflection on experience and practice.

**Devices for World-Making Through Art**

Each of the artists with whom we spoke about world-making focused on the ‘making’ part of that compound word, and spoke eloquently about their own approaches and processes of making art. Several of them independently identified the ‘world’ part of that term as something related either to the world of art in which they live, or the studio space—a ‘safe place’ for thinking, making and shaping—or the actual process of art-making as a world in itself. World-making is thus, for them, both noun and verb, both space and process.

Goodman takes a slightly more prescriptive approach. While his argument is productively open and plural, he does keep his attention, for the most part, on process. Early in the book he attempts to put flesh on the bones of ideas of world-making by listing the techniques and devices he identifies as being at the heart of this process. Among those listed are some that have relevance to the making and/or the viewing of visual arts: ‘weighting’ for instance, which references the ways different artists will show very different depictions of a same scene, or ‘ordering’, which involves the organisation and arrangements of the parts that make up the work. Each is, of course, dependent on the processes followed by the artists concerned—the decision about the perspective on and proxemics to a scene, or the colour palette used. However, they seem at least equally relevant to the critic or other viewer, whose interest may be in comparing like with like, rather than in the originary act of making the world of the work.

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32 Ibid., p. 10.
33 Ibid., p. 12.
Others of his devices do seem more relevant to the making, than to the reading, of a work. ‘Deletion and supplementation’, for instance, involves selective appropriation and excision of ‘what is there’ in order to create a world out of another world. Goodman exemplifies this by referring to what he calls ‘a lithograph by Giacometti’ which ‘fully presents a walking man by sketches of nothing but the head, hands and feet’. This is presumably Alberto Giacometti’s ‘Walking man’ (1957), a print that beautifully conveys movement through a few gestural lines. But perhaps Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Nude descending a staircase No. 2’ (1912) more precisely exemplifies deletion and supplementation because it not only excises both the surroundings and the detail of the nude’s face and body, but also supplements the image by means of repetition, in the process creating a world of movement.

Whether one identifies his list of devices as genuinely part of the process of making art works/worlds, or more appropriately associated with the analysis of the already-made, Goodman himself names them as tools for world-making: first because they structure how we frame and perceive the world; and next because they ‘are not “found in a world” but built into a world’. So, while Goodman draws on art for his examples, it seems to us that the techniques and processes of world-making he describes do not reliably match how artists describe their techniques and processes, or their understanding of what they are seeking to do in the making of their work/world.

Left to right: Lily Aitui Laita, 2009, Sisifo Frontia 1, Oil on canvas, 36 x 45 cm; Lily Aitui Laita, 2009, Sisifo Frontia 2, Oil on canvas, 36 x 45 cm; Lily Aitui Laita, 2009, Sisifo Frontia 3, Oil on canvas, 36 x 45 cm.

Courtesy Lorraine Webb

34 Ibid., p. 14.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
There are some parallels with practice, though, because fundamentally, what artists are doing is trying to find something, and create something, that hasn’t been before. Artists engaged in this work do not necessarily know what it is they are looking for. All they can do is search through the materials, work with the process, and take the time to sort, to add in, and to take away, in the attempt to create that ‘something new’, or find ways of ‘seeing anew’. This is very similar to Goodman’s ‘deletion and supplementation’, but in a more organic way than his account suggests. Lily Aitui Laita, for instance, identifies a core element of the processes of making as involving ‘a continuum, blurring of boundaries’; which does not precisely match Goodman’s list of devices. Nor does she conceive of world-making in art as producing an end product as such. ‘There is not a final destination’, she says; rather ‘making is a continuum and you’re in the moment, making things up as you go’. This does not imply randomness; like the other artists in the exhibition, Lily’s work pursues some enduring concerns or points of interest; but it is neither reductive nor mechanistic. Instead the process relies on absorption in the physicality of making, and in engaging with the layers, the veiling, that is an effect of painting on a flat surface. It is a task of making and also of finding; of ‘building’ it into a world, certainly, but (pace Goodman) quite possibly of ‘finding’ it in that world too.

**Making Worlds? A Conclusion**

What we can identify from the literature on world-making, starting with Goodman’s seminal work and going right up to the present, as well as the interviews we held with the artists, is that there is fairly close agreement among both artists and philosophers/critics about the broad principles of world-making. These are: that worlds are multiple, plastic and contingent; that the physical world informs but does not necessitate any single experience or understanding of the lived, constructed world/s; that a world is never complete, but always in process; and that visual art may lack the capacity to mount a coherent argument, but can effectively convey the sense of ‘world’ through the images it depicts. Art is not divorced from the discursive domain, but it is weighted more to the side of organic than linguistic thought. Consequently, the making of art, and to some extent its reception, operates on the body and its affects. Indeed, as several of the artists suggested in their interviews, the worlds made in art may be as small as the body of the artist or the viewer, and are likely to be built in, and by, bodily orientation and reaction. Because it thus sidesteps discourse, art can rupture the conventions of seeing and knowing, and show the world in a new frame, a new light: we *feel* art at least as much as we *think* or indeed see art.

This extra-discursive, physical element enables art to introduce—or rather, re-awaken—us to other ways of thinking: thinking through seeing, thinking
through movement, thinking through making: thinking outside the confines of language. This has the potential to awaken new understandings of world because it allows the individual to rupture the controlling effects of linguistic discourse and contemporary ways of knowing and of being. This happens primarily when an individual breaks with their conventional ways of seeing— is able to see in a new way—and thus interrupts the controlling effects of what psychologist William James first described as ‘selective attention’:

> Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no interest for me. My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground—intelligible perspective, in a word.  

The ‘utter chaos’, which is in fact the multitude of material, the multitude of worlds, is not necessarily something to be dismissed. The ‘intelligibility’ that selective attention produces is manufactured, rather than actual—that is to say, the ‘world’ as it is conventionally understood has no more reality than the worlds manufactured in a studio. But the latter worlds can shift perspective and suggest new ways to understand and inhabit the physical and social worlds in which we all live. Being willing to take on new experiences, or attend to things beyond one’s experience; being willing to (re)shape one’s mind by noticing things that are not conventionally part of the brief: these are central to art-making and to world-making, and allow experimental and experiential engagement with things as they are, and as they might be.

Art, or world: which comes first? Does art make and shape our worlds, or does the world make and shape the possibilities of art? Like any chicken and egg question, it is almost certainly true that it works both ways. Art is in the world, and the world is in art; the social, discursive and material worlds inform the possibilities of art, and art shapes ways of seeing and understanding those same worlds.

What then is the point of art? We suggest that a point might be to help us—artists, audiences—fit ourselves to the world, and the world to us. Simon Schama writes, in this respect, that human beings are characterised by ‘an unassuageable craving’ to ‘nail down transient experience’, something that is, he claims:

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as basic to us as the self-pitying sorrow for our own mortality, and just as invariably doomed to disappointment. But art draws its wistful power from the heroically futile struggle against disappearance, and what it leaves behind are the visual traces of its defiance.  

Those ‘visual traces’ not only provide a permanent record of how the world was, but also a blueprint for how things might be. And that wistful power is perhaps what is at the heart of world-making in art—the attempt to re-examine the ‘what is’, and to make it into something that is genuinely new.

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Appendix: Artists’ Biographical Information

**Chaco Kato** (Japan/Australia)

*Meals in the forest*, 2006. Oil stick, oil, crayon, 1200 x 1670 mm

*White Nest*, 2009. Acrylic yarn, peg, dimensions variable

Chaco works predominantly in what she calls ‘ephemeral sculpture’: site-specific installations made of ephemeral materials—string, vegetable matter—not designed for permanence. Chaco comes from Japan; has lived and studied in Japan, the US, France and in Australia, where she now lives; and held an artist residency at the Quay School of the Arts in 2000. See http://www.chacokato.com/biography/

**Lily Aitui Laita** (Ngati Raukawa, Tanugamanono, New Zealand and Samoa)

*After Aoga*, 2009. Acrylic media on wooden trays, dimensions variable

*Sisifo Frontia*, 2009. Acrylic media on canvas, 355 x 455 mm

Lily, a painter who draws on a heritage that includes Maori, Pakeha and Samoan, taught for some time at the Quay School of the Arts, and now teaches art in an Auckland college.

**Kate Lepper** (New Zealand/United Kingdom)

*Dead Frog Tripod*, 2010. Found plastic bags, tree leaves, dessicated frog carcass, plywood, found packing material

*Mini Meadows* (installation view detail), 2009. Meadow plants, scrap pvc fabric, found objects, second hand enema bags, solar shower, IV drips, water, soil


Kate is an installation artist and a recent graduate from the MFA (painting) program of the Slade School of Fine Art, having previously graduated from the Quay School of the Arts. See http://katelepper.com/
Faith McManus (Ngapuhi, Ngai Takoto; Aotearoa, New Zealand)

*Wiki* (from the Riders of the Red Manuka Suite), 2009. Colour Woodcut, 260 x 190 mm

*ROTRM Toile*, 2011. Colour Woodcut on Harakeke (Flax) paper, 900 x 600 mm

Faith is a printmaker, and was previously a member of the teaching staff at the Quay School of the Arts. She has a DFA (Hons) from Otago Polytechnic, a MFA from RMIT Melbourne and works and teaches in Northland.

Helen Manning (New Zealand)

*Fairytale Childhood*, 2006. Mixed media, size variable

*Fabricator 1*, 2011. Machine embroidery thread and mixed media, 250 x 250 x 150 mm

Helen is a graduate of the painting programme at the Quay School of the Arts, and now works in contemporary sculpture. She lives and works in the North Island, New Zealand.

Kura Te Waru Rewiri (Ngati Kahu, Ngati Raukawa ki Kauwhata and Ngatirangi; Aotearoa, New Zealand)

*Beyond the Veils 1*, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 1500 x 2000 mm

*Harmony/Disharmony*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas, 960 x 1120 mm

Kura is a painter who has been making and exhibiting art since 1975. Previously on the staff of the Quay School of the Arts, she currently lives and works in Northland, Aotearoa New Zealand. See [http://www.maoriartmarket.com/kura-waru-rewiri-p-264.html](http://www.maoriartmarket.com/kura-waru-rewiri-p-264.html)

Lorraine Webb (South Africa, New Zealand)

(see also Contributors list)

*Ideal Childhood #2*, 2010. Watercolour on paper, 280 x 380 mm

*Red Gulf*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 1000 x 1500 mm

Lorraine Webb is a painter whose work is in public collections in New Zealand, and private collections in Australia, New Zealand and France. Head of Painting at Whanganui UCOL’s Quay School of the Arts in New Zealand, she has a DFA (Honours) Printmaking from the University of Canterbury, and a MFA by research from the VCA, University of Melbourne.
This essay examines how the remarkably vibrant and cosmopolitan art scene in post-war Italy helped to shape a society undergoing a difficult period of transition. In a few short years, despite catastrophic economic problems and deep, ongoing political and social divisions, Italy emerged from wartime chaos and ruin to become one of the world’s great post-war democratic and economic successes. That the visual arts were considered important to this recovery is demonstrated by the enormous effort put into art and cinema in Italy at the time of the European Recovery Program (Marshall Plan). However, precisely what role did art play in this recovery? More specifically, in what ways did artists respond to the post-war challenge of forging relationships with new global communities? In this paper, which investigates the international cultural exchanges that took place in Italy during the 1950s, we set out to answer these questions. By exploring the ways in which artists in Italy initiated and became involved in dialogues and collaborations with their international colleagues, and how international artists were drawn from around the world to participate in Italian creative industries, we show how art in Italy contributed to the national recovery by working to re-invent the very idea of Italy as a modern, open and global society.

As has been demonstrated in the considerable literature on this period of Italy’s turbulent twentieth-century history, the extraordinary economic and political recovery of Italy in the years after World War II was accompanied by a renaissance in cultural terms that had far reaching implications within Italy and far beyond.1 Across a broad range of media, including cinema, painting and sculpture, but also design, fashion and architecture, Italy rose to prominence in this period as one of the world’s premier producers of visual cultures. Accompanying this was an unprecedented boom in output. To take some significant examples: Film production in Italy underwent rapid growth in this period, rising from 92 in 1950 to over 200 films per year in the 1960s, and Italian neo-realism, which became one of the world’s most famous cinematic traditions, continues to occupy a central place in film histories, film festivals

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and cine-club cultures internationally.\textsuperscript{2} A similar boom took place in the realm of fine art, with contemporary painters such as Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana beginning to attract immense interest from international museums and galleries in Europe and the United States, commanding record prices in the art market both in the 1950s and 60s and in the present day.

As we have argued elsewhere, one of the distinctive characteristics of Italian culture in this period is the open, international exchange that underpinned this cultural boom, as filmmakers, artists and writers were drawn to the country and local producers sought out collaborative relationships with international creative figures from beyond Italy.\textsuperscript{3} In this paper we argue that a collaborative dialogue with American, European and Japanese art, typical at a broader level of the Italian response to cultures from around the globe in this period, was an essential component of the extraordinary post-war recovery of Italy at an economic, political and cultural level. In order to understand the impact of the incredibly diverse cast of creative figures on the Italian cultural scene, and its impact on questions of national identity more broadly, our method focuses on the social networks between producers and consumers that underpin works of visual culture, and examines the communities of art production and consumption as well as the works which were the outcomes of these exchanges.

Nearly 70 years later, it is, for many, hard to credit the circumstances that turned the defeated and depressed Axis powers of 1945 into the countries of economic miracle. This development was, perhaps, most miraculous in the Italian context. As Ginsborg points out, however, in the matter of post-war economic expansion, Italy was a major protagonist, radically reshaping itself from a peasant country to a major Western industrial nation.\textsuperscript{4} The apparent, subtle political instabilities of the centre-left/centre-right frictions under the hegemony of Christian Democrat stewardship of the body politic should have worked against this transformation. Nevertheless, on the back of incredible growth in the production and consumption of goods (electrical appliances, cars, type-writers amongst others), a six fold increase in trade of these goods with other nations, monetary policy sympathetic to GDP growth, business investment and capital, economic development was undeniable. In income terms alone, Ginsborg highlights that over the period Italy had the greatest income per capita increase of Europe.\textsuperscript{5} As Pieter Lagrou argues, however, national recovery involves not

\textsuperscript{4} Ginsborg, \textit{A History of Contemporary Italy}, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., pp. 212–18, 235–239.
only ‘material reconstruction and economic growth, political restoration and national reconciliation’ but also ‘the reinvention of national identities’. What we argue is that the recovery of Italy involved a national re-invention that involved a radical opening at the political, social and cultural level. Evidence for this openness at the cultural level, which contrasted enormously with the closed fascist society of preceding decades and its policies of autarky, is found in the broad range of institutions, events, and individuals with deep and active connections to international artistic communities that flourished in Italy during this period. These include the French and American academies, major exhibition venues including the Venice Biennale, foreign news desks and the major Hollywood studios. It also involved visual artists from countries in Europe, the Americas and Oceania such as Asger Jorn [Denmark], Roberto Matta [Chile], Wilfredo Lam [Cuba], Cy Twombly [USA], and Albert Tucker [Australia], as well as international art promoters such as Peggy Guggenheim and Irene Brin, all of whom lived and/or worked in Italy at this time. As a result, rather than falling into a defensive nationalism or passively reproducing the imperatives of the victorious Western superpower, Italy became an intense cross-cultural centre of creative and cultural activity.

In what follows, a history of gestural painting in Milan, Turin and Venice but also smaller regional Italian centres such as Alba and Albisola, a central focus will be the Italian Nuclear art movement and its journal *Il gesto* in the years 1952—1959. As the case studies will demonstrate, the evolution of gestural painting and its eventual critique within the Italian context was the product of intense exchange with artists from a range of different regions and countries, including Scandinavia, Northern Europe, North and South America and Japan. As Nancy Jachec has recently shown, gestural painting was the vehicle for a post-war idea of pan-European integration, particularly at the Venice Biennale exhibitions of this period, where the work of French, German and Italian artists in particular was connected to a universalising, humanist philosophy which connected peoples and cultures across national borders. In this paper we continue this vein of research, while focusing more on individual artists and artistic groups and their writings rather than the management of major exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, and examining those forces leading to the breakdown of the predominance of gestural painting rather than those leading to its ascendancy. As we demonstrate, the development of gestural or Informal painting in Italy was intimately connected to exchanges at the micro-level between individual artists and artistic groups across Europe, the Americas

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7 Gardner et al., ‘Cold War Cultures and Globalisation’.
and Asia. This tendency refutes the idea of a reclusive, national style emerging in this period but also demonstrates how, contrary to earlier accounts, which have interpreted the presence of American Abstract expressionism in countries like Italy as a weapon of ‘soft power’, the Italian response in its international dimensions allowed for distinctive, regional responses to broader transnational developments in art.

**Informal Painting and Nuclear Art in Italy:**

**European and American Networks**

In the years immediately following the end of World War II, Italian artists began to experiment with Informal painting. This was an abstract form of art, inspired by surrealist automatist techniques, which exceeded the closure of clearly-defined form and focused on artistic process. Underpinning the rise of this style in Italy was a series of important exhibitions in Rome, Venice and Milan of European and American art in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as well as a series of exchanges between Italian, European and American artists.

In 1952 the Italian artist Gianni Dova, who was a member of the Milan-based Spatialist movement led by Lucio Fontana, began to include free, swirling loops of paint in his compositions. According to a contemporary artist familiar with Dova’s work at that time, Dova ‘swore only by Pollock and Wols.’ The German-born artist Wols, who was considered the chief protagonist of the European Informal movement at this time, worked in an erratic scratching and scumbling technique connected to surrealist automatism which was first visible in Italy in paintings exhibited in Milan’s II Milione gallery in 1949. Contemporary commentators on Wols’ work concentrated on the artist’s existential act, seen as a despairing attempt to wrest personal freedom through the moral and aesthetic authenticity of choosing from the myriad possibilities for action presented in an absurd world. The French critic Michel Tapié, for example, wrote about such works in terms of their ‘violence of the gesture’ and ‘expressivity.’

Jackson Pollock’s innovative dripping technique was first visible in Italy at a 1950 exhibition organised by Peggy Guggenheim in Venice. In an essay by the Italian critic Bruno Alfieri on Pollock, which appeared in the context of the

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10 For the impact and development of informal painting in Italy and Europe see Petersen, S. 2009, *Space Age Aesthetics: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and the Postwar European Avant-Garde*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, esp. pp. 78–79.

11 Quoted in Petersen, *Space Age Aesthetics*, p. 79.

latter exhibition in 1950, Pollock’s work was discussed in the following terms: ‘Pollock has broken all the barriers between his picture and himself: His picture is the most immediate and spontaneous painting. Each one of his pictures is part of himself…I start from the picture, and discover the man.’\(^\text{13}\) In making such statements, Alfieri was repeating a theme evident in critical commentary in the USA on the artist’s work, including in a 1949 review by Sam Hunter published in *The New York Times* which described Pollock’s work as ‘a direct physical expression of states of being rather than of thinking or of knowing.’\(^\text{14}\)

As statements by Italian artists in the later 1950s convey, such techniques and theories associated with Wols and Pollock would become something of an orthodoxy among Italian painters. In a statement in the catalogue to his 1957 Rome exhibition Gastone Novelli argued that:

> The creation of a valid artistic oeuvre has its origins in the impulse that triggers action and finishes with the physical act of the execution […]. We must...forget everything that is taught about balance and knowledge, so that the creative act may regain its spontaneity.\(^\text{15}\)

Toti Scialoja, who visited New York in 1956, wrote the following year that ‘painting is not meant to represent, is not a mirror, but serves to express you yourself entirely...a picture is primarily a thing, useful if only for bearing your spiritual imprint. Painting as traces of life.’\(^\text{16}\) In the thinking of these and other Italian artists, painting’s primary purpose was to enable an authentic expression of the individual.\(^\text{17}\) The ideology of this approach to art was that, by abdicating control of the composition and focusing on the gestural process of laying paint down on the canvas, the artist could give expression to an authentic truth: the creative self in its encounter with the material. Rather than a reflective representation of a world or a rational organisation of a surface, Informal painting saw the painterly mark as a sign which embodied its very process of making, and ultimately the source of that process, the creative figure of the artist. Moreover, as Scialoja argued, at that time Informal painting was thought

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\(^{17}\) See Vetrocq, M. E. 1989, ‘National Style and the Agenda for Abstract Painting in Post-War Italy’, *Art History*, vol. 12, no. 4. p. 465: ‘The end of the first phase of ‘post-war’ painting in Italy was signalled by the radical definition of the individual as the sole bearer of the energies of artistic creation.’
to express ‘intrinsic being in the anonymous existence of masses, of machines.’\textsuperscript{18} In this he was echoing the American art historian Meyer Schapiro’s view in 1957 that ‘a culture that becomes increasingly organised through industry, economy and the state’ leads artists to emphasise the material aspects of their craft ‘which confer to the utmost degree the aspect of the freely made.’\textsuperscript{19} For many Italian artists, the Informal movement, with its origins in French, German and American painting, provided the means for resisting social and technological pressures thought to work against authentic individuality.

Among the many artists to take up a version of Informal painting in Italy during the 1950s were Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo, the founders of the Nuclear Art movement in Milan. In the early 1950s they began working in a gestural, spiralling and spattered painting mode. As Marco Bugatti argues, Baj’s and Dangelo’s Nuclearism was ‘one of the very first Informal experiments in Italy, and perhaps the only one which was fully gestural.’\textsuperscript{20} In its very beginnings the movement employed gestural techniques with the object of disintegrating form. Among their techniques were the swirling movement of poured paint and the chance effects created by the mixture of oil and water. In this way they abdicated control over their work and allowed the materials at hand to determine the form.\textsuperscript{21}

As they stated in their ‘Manifesto of Nuclear Painting’ issued on the occasion of an exhibition of Baj’s work held in Brussels in February 1952, ‘The Nuclearists desire to demolish all the ‘isms’ of a painting that inevitably lapses into academicism…. Forms disintegrate; the new forms are those of the atomic universe.’\textsuperscript{22} Like many other Informal artists, Baj and Dangelo saw their work as providing an antidote to the pre-meditated compositional routines of geometric abstraction that had enjoyed a certain currency in Europe immediately after the war. Beniamino dal Fabbro wrote in 1953, for example, that ‘the Nuclearists are romantics in revolt against the academic classicism of the abstractionists.’\textsuperscript{23} However, for all that the Nuclearists were connected stylistically and theoretically to contemporary currents of Informal painting, they differed from the American and other European examples of that style in that their gestural and automatic procedures embodied ideas relating to modern science and technology. Their

\textsuperscript{21} For a description of some of these techniques, see Schwarz, A. 1957, \textit{Pittura italiana del dopoguerra 1945–1957}, Milan, Schwarz, p. 152, no. 1.
\textsuperscript{23} dal Fabbro, B. 1953, ‘Definition of the Nuclearists’, in Schwarz, \textit{Arte nucleare}, p. 207.
work was an attempt to do justice to what they saw as the new realities of nuclear fission and microbiology, a vision of the world as matter in movement. In this they were continuing the work of an artistic movement from earlier in the twentieth century, Italian Futurism, which had put great emphasis upon industrial and mechanical processes and products, and had been inspired by such modern inventions as the racing car and the machine gun. Indeed, in spite of their distance from the belligerent, hyper-nationalistic dimensions of early Futurism, in one sense the Nuclearists were engaged in an updating of that earlier, technical dimension of Futurism by addressing the newer phenomenon of nuclear energy in their work. Nevertheless, as their work evolved, the Nuclear artists, and in particular Enrico Baj, would become more engaged with the global networks of artists beyond the borders of Italy, making discussions of his work in terms of pre-war national traditions difficult to sustain.

Enrico Baj, 1954, *Arte nucleare*, Lithograph, 32 x 22 cm.

Courtesy the authors
Exchanges with Northern Europe: CoBrA, Asger Jorn and Dada

In the spring of 1952, Baj met the Belgian artist Pierre Alechinsky in Paris. Thus began an important association which would lead to a close working relationship with the Danish artist Asger Jorn, who along with Alechinsky, was a member of the recently dispersed CoBrA group of artists from Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands. Through the group, Baj and the other Nuclear artists were invited to join the International Movement for an Imagist Bauhaus founded by Jorn in Italy in 1954. This movement was intended as a protest against functionalist tendencies in architecture, design and art, tendencies, which Jorn viewed as oppressive due to their exclusion of representational art. In a letter to Baj, Jorn outlined his response to the Swiss artist Max Bill’s call to re-establish the original Bauhaus on the principles of a rationalist synthesis of art and architecture. Jorn declared ‘a war on the part of all experimental artists against the oppression of abstract and functionalist architecture against art and free painting. The house must not be a machine for living in, but a machine to shock and impress, a machine of human and universal expression.’

This critical attitude to functionalism, scepticism about industrialisation and emphasis on the importance of expression went hand in hand in Jorn’s thinking with a critique of certain aspects of Informal painting in Europe generally. In 1954, Jorn argued that Michel Tapié had created what amounted to an academy of Informal abstraction. For Jorn this also extended to the Italian situation and therefore had important implications for Nuclear painting. As Jorn explained in a letter of 1955 to Baj, in which he criticised the Spatialism of artists such as Gianni Dova and Lucio Fontana,

The Nuclear movement floats in the air and goes forward without strategy and on the basis of tactical opportunity. To stabilize it one can found it in commerce like the Spatial movement, which will assure an economic evolution, but not an artistic evolution, because popularity is gained through repetition and not through renovation.

For Jorn, who by 1954 had relocated to Italy, the gestural painting that was beginning to flourish in Italy was compromised by its connection to the art market. It was being reproduced for the sake of market popularity and was therefore not truly innovative. In this sense it could be seen as an ossified form of painting commensurate with the academicism of art that the Nuclear painters had so railed against.

Both of these letters from Jorn quoted above found a warm reception from Baj, who, as we know from his written replies, was largely in agreement with his Danish colleague. Indeed, by 1954 Baj had begun to abandon gestural abstraction and introduce human figures and non-fine art materials including mass produced printed fabrics and wallpaper into his work. As Edouard Jaguer would point out several years later, in Baj’s work around this time ‘post-Informal automatism meets with two other great fundaments of ‘modern’ creation: collage and the

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‘ready-made.’ The shift away from Informal painting in Baj went hand in hand with the introduction of two techniques borrowed from the earlier Dada movement, which challenged the ideology of artistic originality.

Among the stimuli for Baj’s interest in Dada and their techniques of collage and the ready-made was the activity of the Egyptian-born scholar Arturo Schwarz who had moved to Italy in 1949. Schwarz published and exhibited works by French and German Dada artists, including Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters and Francis Picabia, in his bookshop gallery in Milan from 1954. Dada was also present in other forums and venues in Italy around this time including published discussions of the movement, which began to appear in Italian publications such as Achille Perilli’s article ‘Antologia Dada’ in a 1954 issue of the journal Civiltà delle Macchine. In response to his encounter with early Dada, Baj began extravagantly debasing his painting with outlandish intrusions of mass-produced kitsch, imposing monstrous figures onto his collages of boudoir wallpaper backgrounds and soft-pornographic paintings purchased ready-made at flea markets. In a strident reaction against Informal painting, prompted by an exchange with contemporary and historical artists from Scandinavia and northern Europe, these works strip painting of the existential dramas of contemporary gestural abstraction and desublimate the art work by acclimatising it to the vernacular world of the everyday.

Il gesto, the French Connection and the Attack on ‘Style’

1955 saw the first issue of Il gesto: International Review of Free Forms, a journal published by the Nuclear movement in collaboration with the French Journal Phases. This publication, which served as an exhibition catalogue of a show at the Schettini Gallery in Milan, also constituted the second issue of the Information Bulletin of Asger Jorn’s Imagist Bauhaus. The journal was an international collaboration, which documented the work of a very wide group of artists, from virtually every European and Scandinavian nation as well as the USA, Canada, several Latin American countries and Japan. The art reproduced in this issue of Il gesto largely conformed to the international Informal and

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30 For the history of Arturo Schwarz and his gallery, see Celant, G. 1998, Piero Manzoni, Milan, Charta, pp. 262–264.
32 Il Gesto. Rassegna internazionale delle forme libere 1, published in June 1955 in Milan by the Movimento arte nucleare Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo was entitled N. 2 del Bolletino d’Informazione del Movimento Internazionale per una Bauhaus Imaginista.
Abstract Expressionist tendency. However, by the time of the next issue of Il gesto in 1957 edited by Baj and Dangelo, which sported a cover by the Cuban artist Wilfredo Lam who was working in Italy during this period, the attitude of the editors had changed and the journal became a venue for publically and explicitly expressing a new dissatisfaction with Informal art.

The French critic Edouard Jaguer, who was director of Phases and closely associated with both the CoBrA and Nuclear movements, indicted Informal art in the 1957 issue of Il gesto for what he saw as its increasingly mechanical appearance and complacent character:

today we are witnessing a reiterated orgy of coloured stains, always more aleatory, as well as an assault of repeatedly identical modes, which are nothing more than ‘mechanical liberations,’ the shock value of which ends up withdrawing. The gesture, having lost every quality of direct emotional testimony becomes more and more simple reflexes...these stains and scribbles have become nothing but formal tics, the happy externalization of a new intellectual comfort.33

In a 1957 manifesto titled ‘Against Style’, Baj, Dangelo and Piero Manzoni, along with a number of other French artists and critics including Armand, Yves Klein, Pierre Restany, argued that:

In February, 1952, the first Nuclear Manifesto stated our intention of doing away with the last remaining concessions to Academicism. Our revolt against the reign of the right-angle, against the dominion of the gear and the machine, and against chilling and geometrical abstraction, had found its voice.34

The text goes on to draw attention to the fact that, echoing comments made earlier by Jorn about the commercial qualities of Italian Spatalist painting, even the newest painting technique ‘risks becoming the object of stereotypical repetitions of a purely mercantile character.’35 In this attack on ‘style’, they argued that the ‘monochrome propositions’ of the French artist Yves Klein, one of the signatories to the manifesto, were the last possible forms of ‘stylisation.’ In January of 1957 Yves Klein had exhibited a series of monochrome blue paintings at the Apollinaire Gallery in Milan. These uniform surfaces, which were painted with a roller and made use of the newest synthetic pigments and

35 Baj, E. et. al., ‘Contro lo stile’, p. 719. Baj has recently explained that ‘in Italy, painters like the classical Morandini or the modernist Capogrossi...had a tendency to stereotyped repetition…. This behavior is evident in the habitual behavior of homo economicus, who wants to eternally repeat himself. This repetitiveness came to be known as a ‘Style.’ Baj, E. 1980, ‘Baj par Baj’, in Enrico Baj, Paris, Editions Filipacchi, p. 19.
binders, were not only industrial in their execution. As the panels in that Milan exhibition were of identical dimensions and format, Klein also openly flaunted the sameness of individual works. This was an uncompromising attack on the orthodoxy of uniqueness and originality that had defined the Informal painting movement.\(^{36}\)

Interest in Dada, accelerated by Duchamp’s presence in Italy in 1958, continued to propel this questioning of the Informal movement. The September 1958 issue of *Il gesto*, edited by Baj, Dangelo, and the young Milanese artist Piero Manzoni, contained a 1956 photograph of Marcel Duchamp before his work, the *Large Glass*, as well as one of Picabia’s mechanical drawings of 1917.\(^{37}\) It was through an art inspired by international currents of Informal gesture painting that the Nuclearists had initially sought a way to go beyond academicism. However, the Nuclear artists and the international circles they moved in were concerned about this travesty of painting, this spectre of sameness and exhaustion of language that they sensed invading art. It was increasingly evident that the very means of achieving a resistance to the world of ‘the gear and machine’ had been absorbed within it, and the art of gesture was fast becoming little more than frivolous window-dressing for an unchanged industrialised world.

**Manzoni, Klein and Johns: After the Gesture**

Piero Manzoni, another Milanese artist briefly associated with the Nuclear art movement, would further the critique of Informal painting in his work. In the later 1950s, in opposition to the Informal painters’ tendency to emphasise the spontaneous, original and the handmade, Manzoni started to deliberately and aggressively incorporate mechanical, industrial and pre-fabricated procedures into his working process. After a brief period in which he employed a standardised mechanical beast or homunculus figure in his works, he began to use imprints of objects, as in his series of paintings *Pincers, Pins, Keys and Nails*. This was followed by a few paintings in which actual objects were included, such as *Untitled* of 1957, which has a key applied to the surface of the canvas.

These works were quickly followed by his first white monochrome paintings, inspired by the example of Yves Klein, such as *Achrome* of 1958, assembled in a repetitive and mundane manner out of pre-cut squares of canvas. This series was a manifestation of another aspect of the critique of Informal painting explicitly referred to in the manifesto ‘Against Style’: the ‘tabula rasa.’ This


concept, which expressed the desire for a clean slate for art, a kind of ground zero of painting, had already been embodied in Yves Klein’s monochromes. One of Manzoni’s first ‘white’ paintings of 1958 assembled in this way was published in the third issue of *Il gesto* in September of the same year.\(^3^8\) The appearance of this work in this issue of the review, which was co-edited by Manzoni, was a sign that the Nuclear movement was beginning to distance itself artistically as well as theoretically from the Informal current. Manzoni’s achromes were the artist’s attempt to put forward his idea of an art work uninflected by the limitations imposed by individualised artistic gesture. Like Klein’s paintings, Manzoni removed painterly skill as much as possible. The reduction of the artist’s intervention to the minimum, to a workman-like and mechanical repetition, of a laying out of similar elements, removed subjective content from the painting.

Piero Manzoni, 1958–1959, *Achrome*, Kaolin and canvas squares, 130.5 x 97.6 cm.


Manzoni’s definitive break with the Nuclear movement also happened around this time as he began to reject that movement’s mourning of the loss of originality, expression and authenticity in art and more fully embrace the routines of the machine. Among the international inspirations for this shift in Manzoni’s work was indubitably the work of the Dadaists visible in Milan at this time as well as

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\(^3^8\) *Il gesto* 3, 1958, n.p.
that of the American Neo-dada artist Jasper Johns, whose 1955 collage painting *Flag* depicting the American flag was visible at the Venice Biennale in 1958. Manzoni’s works, already exhibited and published in mid to late-1958, literalised and made explicit in a visual way the repudiation of artistic skill incarnated in both Klein’s and John’s work. The repetitious applications of identical squares of canvas, applied in a methodical way, not only highlighted the lack of gestural and psychic investment on the part of the artist but also would lead ultimately to a questioning of the definition, purpose and function of the art object. The artistic attack in Italy on the premises of international Informal painting was now complete.

**Gutai and Fontana: The Japanese/Italian Dialogue**

Another kind of response to Informal painting visible in Italy around this time was presented by the work of Japanese artists. An exchange with Japan was begun in 1955 by the Nuclear group through Enrico Baj who established contact with the Japanese artist Shiryu Morita representing the Bokuzin-Kai group of calligraphic artists. This was followed by a dialogue between the work of Lucio Fontana and the artists of the Gutai group based in Osaka whose first European exhibition took place in April 1959 in Turin. By this time the work of Lucio Fontana had been reproduced and discussed on several occasions in the pages of the group’s eponymous journal. This contact between Fontana and the Gutai artists came about largely through the efforts of Michel Tapié, who had edited the eighth issue of *Gutai* in 1957. That issue, subtitled ‘The Informal Adventure’, had a reproduction of one of Fontana’s earliest ‘hole’ canvases of 1949, in which the surface of the canvas was punctured with a series of perforations, on both front and back covers. The immediately preceding, seventh issue of *Gutai*, also published in 1957, contained a detailed discussion of Fontana’s work in an article by Jiro Yoshihara titled ‘The Third Gutai Art Exhibition.’ In his description of the work of a number of Gutai artists, the author refers to Kanayama, who made paintings with electronic toys that traced patterns on a horizontally-placed canvas. He argues that ‘These are paintings in which the hand of the author is literally absent.’ Later in the same text, he discusses the work of Shimamoto, who produced canvases by literally shooting paint at them. Comparing this work to that of Fontana, Yoshihara argues that

39 In May of 1958, Manzoni and Baj were included in an exhibition titled ‘Avant-garde’ with works by the Dadaist Francis Picabia. Manzoni’s awareness of the Dada movement is further evidenced by 1959 in his statements in the interview ‘Otto pittore otto a Manzoni’, *Travaso* 1959, reprinted and translated in G. Celant (ed.), *Piero Manzoni*, p. 282, but also by his publication of neo-dada and dada works in *Azimuth* 1, 1959.


41 *Gutai* 8, 1957.
‘This is an investigation of the highest order of chanciness. The hand of the artist does not paint even the smallest part of the canvas…these are creations painted by mechanical will.’

Lucio Fontana, 1949, *Concetto spaziale*, Paper on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

While there are no statements attesting to Fontana’s attitude to the Gutai group, the fact that Shimamoto had been producing canvases with holes in them for some years would surely have roused Fontana’s interest. He did possess a copy of *Gutai* 9, which was issued in April of 1958, where his own work is reproduced alongside that of Kanayama and Shimamoto as well as other gestural painters from this period, including the Frenchman Georges Mathieu and the Americans Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly. The Japanese group’s unusual techniques offered a twist on the confessional aesthetic of Informal painting. In later 1958 Fontana shifted definitively from his more Informal painting-inspired hole paintings with their erratic, impulsive appearance, to a new series of more mechanical-looking paintings cut open in long slashes with a Stanley knife. These works, with their cool, clean aesthetic, literally and polemically worked to ‘empty out’ human gesture. Given the artist’s awareness of Gutai’s mechanical procedures, it seems likely that the work of the Japanese artists was one of the many important influences contributing to this shift in Fontana’s later work.

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43 A copy of this issue is held at the Lucio Fontana Foundation in Milan.
44 As the American critic Dore Ashton would observe late in 1958, ‘the one virtue of painting that the gesture eliminates is its individuality. Far from being autographic, the automatism in these paintings is eerily anonymous: a great tangle of lines spreading net-like over the world in an equalizing action.’ Ashton, D. 1958, ‘Art: Japan’s Gutai Group’, *The New York Times*, 25 September.
One of the many responses to gestural painting evident in Italy in this period, Gutai and Fontana pushed the gesture to an extreme, revealing that the mark’s reification as a mechanical device was one consequence of the Informal ideology, thereby performing a critique of the mythical subjectivity of gestural painting.

**Conclusion**

After an initial period in which the American and European versions of Informal painting had a certain currency in Italy, Enrico Baj, inspired by the work of Asger Jorn, debased the canvas support for Informal paintings with kitsch decorative materials. Piero Manzoni looking to historical examples of the Dada artists, contemporary French art and American Neo-dada painting, removed gesture in favour of a blank ‘tabula rasa’. The strategy of the Japanese Gutai group, which exhibited in Italy but also were in dialogue with Lucio Fontana at this time, was to produce an absurd exasperation of the gesture, removing psychic connection to the artist’s presence. All these artists working and/or exhibiting in Italy at this time were responding to the fact that, across the globe, it was becoming increasingly evident that gestural painting’s quest for authenticity had resulted in a machine-like, formulaic art.

This short history of gesture painting in Italy in the 1950s, from an initial enthusiasm to its eventual critique and demise, reveals a broadly international dialogue conducted between artists from many different parts of the globe. Emblematic of this dialogue and this collaboration was a work produced in Milan in 1960 titled *The Large Collective Anti-Fascist Painting* with contributions from the Paris based artists Jean-Jacques Lebel, Erro and Antonio Recalcati, with Enrico Baj, Roberta Crippa and Gianni Dova in Italy and Wilfredo Lam from Cuba. This painting, which was far removed stylistically from the gestural painting of the previous decade and was a protest in support of Algerian independence, has been described by the art historian Jill Carrick as a ‘transnational collective’ work. Through vibrant, international artistic exchanges such as these, exchanges which characterised the post-war moment in Italy, Italian art integrated itself into larger global artistic economies, attracting and engaging artists from a wide variety of cultures, and thereby helped to give rise to a society which possessed a dynamic transcultural energy exemplifying international perceptions of what a recovered post-war European country might look like.

The period of Italy’s post-war recovery therefore stands as a substantial and highly significant time of interaction between artists and cultures from around

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the globe, equally important in its significance and productivity as Paris and Berlin in the inter-war years. Furthermore, in its very modernity, we argue that Italy’s post-war cultural explosion played a role not only in that nation’s recovery but also in defining the significance of Italy as a global brand in the fields of international art, design and travel. In addition to the artists already highlighted, Achille Castiglioni and Emilio Pucci in design and fashion, Alberto Moravia, Primo Levi, Tennessee Williams, Dylan Thomas and Aldous Huxley in literature, and avant-garde artists including Salvador Dali, Henry Moore, all played a role in Italian cultural production in the post-war period. Together these individuals contributed to transforming post-war Rome, Milan and Venice into cosmopolitan, global centres of cultural activity. In so doing they had a lasting effect on contemporary art and entertainment cultures around the world, as well as on international perceptions of what Italy would be after World War II, and what Italy remains in the popular and critical imagination to this day.
The Third Biennale of Sydney: 'White Elephant or Red Herring?'

Anthony Gardner and Charles Green


Courtesy Biennale of Sydney
The focus of this essay is the indisputably important 1979 Biennale of Sydney, which launched Sydney’s biennials as an international event seeking out adventurous art from Western Europe and the USA. We will argue that it sought both to present an image of the world of contemporary art and also, more critically, to embody a key strand of the globalising art world’s emerging contemporaneity.

By the end of the 1970s, the arrival of relatively affordable international flights had pushed Australian artists, along with their peers from other ‘margins’ of contemporary art, into closer contact with North Atlantic art centres. The result was the beginning of a Balkanisation of art worlds beyond New York and Western Europe: within each art centre, a division into two overlapping art worlds, a provincial ghetto represented by one set of commercial art galleries or an international art world enclave represented by another, usually smaller and more exclusive, number of galleries and, increasingly, some artist-run spaces.¹

This was as true in Tokyo as it was in Sydney or Melbourne. The two art worlds overlapped but the latter world—that which saw itself as international and part of a nascent, globalised art world—did not at that time or later necessarily renew itself from the former’s talent-pool of the best and brightest, and then only reluctantly or in such a way as to reinforce North Atlantic primacy over the image of what was contemporary art. Many scholars’ recent work, particularly that of John Clark, has shown that this remained true even of the huge Asian biennials that flourished from the 1990s onwards though, increasingly, many younger artists moved easily from international artist residency to residency and from biennial to biennial.²

**Founding the Sydney Biennale**

Both the São Paulo and Sydney Biennales were founded by immigrants from post-War Europe—in São Paulo, Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho; in Sydney, Franco Belgiorno-Nettis. Their motivations were similar, and they had been

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¹ Nothing in our description of the cultural geography of the art world implies a judgement about the quality of any artist’s work and should not be taken as doing so. We are grateful to the Biennale of Sydney for providing us with access to the limited quantity of its exhibition and image archives that is accessible; we mention web-sites below to signpost art history’s newly accessible digital archive as opposed to its fragile existence as transcripts or pamphlets in archives; we are particularly grateful to the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and its extraordinarily resourceful image library archivist, Eric Riddler, for providing us with access to AGNSW’s Biennale of Sydney image files; these document in great detail the Biennales of Sydney from 1976 onwards; we also acknowledge access to exhibition files in the AGNSW Library as well as the Terry Smith ephemera files in the Schaeffer Fine Arts Library, Power Institute, University of Sydney.

affected by their own experiences of post-World War II diaspora. They were European migrants who established themselves as important industrialists, proudly participating in their chosen city’s civic and national desires for international recognition as nascent global cities and as nodes of business and capital in their respective regions in the Southern Hemisphere. Needless to say, civic and national aspirations were never identical nor necessarily in harmony, nor was the balance between the two always equal. Whereas the Federal Government’s new Australia Council for the Arts wished primarily to support art-making nationwide and far less to project Australian art internationally. Its aim was to maximise direct support to Australian artists in the form of grants. Belgiorno-Nettis, on the other hand, wanted to replicate and import the cultural institutions of his homeland to his beloved Sydney, and in particular the venerable institution of the Biennale of Venice:

My love affair with Venice, where I have been a frequent visitor for years, is the source of inspiration for the Biennale. How do you break the isolation of Australia, which I felt strongly myself in the early 50s? How do you inject that flavor of international extravaganza, originality and explosive vision that you see at gatherings in Venice, in the Giardini, in the Corderia, in the Arsenale, with their centuries of tradition?3

Other biennial models than that of Venice were already available, principally the idea of a biennial of the South, current from 1955 onwards, that we have written about elsewhere.4 These ideas might just as easily have been adopted, but there is no evidence that they were discussed and Belgiorno-Nettis’s civic-minded boosterism, nostalgia and philanthropy prevailed. He invented, underpinned and financially supported the new biennial with the organisational and curatorial resources provided by his family conglomerate, the powerful Transfield Corporation, which built bridges, railways and major infrastructure projects. Belgiorno-Nettis moved beyond his previous sponsorship of a major national competition of contemporary art, the Transfield Prize, which he had started in 1961. But an art prize exhibition was a model focused on paintings or sculptures, and this model was on the wane by the early 1970s.

The first, humble 1973 Biennale of Sydney, largely organised and staffed by Transfield, was a simple survey exhibition, not much more than part of the opening celebrations at the spectacular, new, Jørn Utzon-designed Sydney Opera

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House, which incorporated a small exhibition gallery. Most of the artists were Australian and the selection was insular and conservative, especially considering the number of local exhibitions and artists already working in conceptualist or new, post-object forms and the exhibitions of relatively recent international art that had already been seen in Australia. Instead, a much larger and far more innovative exhibition, Recent Australian Art 1973, a Biennale satellite event held simultaneously in the newly upgraded Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney’s state art museum, presented those new forms—installation, performance, film and video—to the Sydney public. Some of the Australian artists working in the new art forms had already established international connections through survey exhibitions or biennials. For instance, minimalist Robert Hunter represented Australia in the 1970 Triennale-India of ‘contemporary world art’ in New Delhi, India with austere, stenciled wall drawings. There, Hunter met Carl Andre, with whom he became good friends and who facilitated Hunter’s participation in other international exhibitions. At that Triennial, Robert Ryman, Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt had represented the US; Waldo Rasmussen, Executive Director of Circulating Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, had curated their national representation. Rasmussen had long been instrumental in sending mega-exhibitions of American art to far-flung global destinations. In 1967, he had organised an enormous and influential exhibition of post-War New York School painting, Two Decades of American Painting, for the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. It had toured to Kyoto, in Japan, to New Delhi, and finally to Melbourne and Sydney.5

The Biennale of Sydney had been founded in 1973 with the mission of engaging two separate groups—on the one hand, local artists, students and intellectuals; on the other, the general public—with the latest forms of contemporary art. But it was now faced with the contradictions inherent in taking on that self-appointed mission in a relatively small art centre. For its founders, the Biennale initially appeared to be Australia’s lifeline to the outside art world. Even at that time, for many artists, it was simply one forum amongst many. For some—even in 1979 for the local artists who were most likely to be invited into these biennials—Australia, like other ‘marginal’ centres like Brazil or Argentina, possessed a more complex and cosmopolitan art scene than simply that of a collection of small, parochial, provincial cities. These cities’ own art scenes had already been enmeshed for a decade or more in the very real 1970s globalisation of contemporary art—or at least conceptualist art—which had from the start flourished beyond New York or London in several far-flung cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Vancouver, Sydney and Melbourne but which was not on display in the 1973 Biennale of Sydney. For visiting artists and curators, all of these cities boasted respectable venues for avant-garde art as

it touched down by mail delivery or in curators’ suitcases. Lucy Lippard easily transported to Seattle her major conceptualist survey, *557,087*, titled after the population of Seattle at the time; her exhibition included John Baldessari, Eva Hesse, Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Sol LeWitt, Daniel Buren, Walter De Maria, and Adrian Piper. In 1969, Joseph Kosuth had commissioned adventurous Melbourne gallerist and patron, Bruce Pollard, to place advertisements in Melbourne newspapers as part of his work, *The Second Investigation, 1969*, coinciding with similar appearances in London and New York papers. Pollard paid for the advertisements (even though one newspaper, Melbourne’s weekly tabloid, the trashy *Truth*, refused to accept them, on the grounds that they were so mysterious that they might somehow be subversive), enabling Kosuth to create a work by remote control at long distance.

The next Sydney Biennale, in 1976, saw the synthesis of two different models of support: the Biennale received an even greater, and now dominant, portion of its sponsorship through the recently-created national government arts funding organisation, the Australia Council (which had been established by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1973, the same year that Belgiorno-Nettis established the Biennale of Sydney), and less from the continuing but smaller support of private donors, of whom Transfield was by far the largest. With the clout provided by its substantial funding, the Australia Council steered the Biennale into a new, mega-exhibition structure. This time, though, instead of participating directly in artist selection as it had in 1973, the Council delegated the task to a director who it knew would seek out new types of art. In effect, this was an early phase in the evolution of a preference for what only partly in jest became known as ‘biennial art.’ The Sydney Biennale was to be governed by a powerful, quasi-autonomous Board, curated by a Director whose position was independent of host venues. This time and henceforth, it would be exhibited in the city’s largest and most venerated art museum, the recently refurbished Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), offering the Biennale temporary access to the museum-quality, climate-controlled spaces and experienced technical staff that an exhibition needed if it were to include international loans. Without doubt, the cosmopolitan, internationalist members of the Australia Council’s Visual Arts Board, led by Leon Paroissien (who was later to direct the 1984 Sydney Biennale and then become inaugural Director of Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art) wished to set in course a new format: the carefully orchestrated narrative of centre-periphery relations and artist choices that would draw supportive international responses and an interest in Australia. However, it would also create negative, frustrated Australian criticism.

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Biennale’s organisers had taken careful account of the initiative of one of their close friends, Sydney-based collector and philanthropist John Kaldor’s series of Art Projects. Kaldor’s invitations to artists to realise a major artistic project in Sydney had begun with Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *Wrapped Coast—One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1969*. He followed this with an invitation to auteur curator Harald Szeemann to assemble a survey exhibition of contemporary Australian art during a lightning-fast visit in 1971 (this did not result in the inclusion of any Australian artists in *documenta 5*, however), and then to Gilbert & George to present their *Singing Sculpture* in 1973. Veteran curator Daniel Thomas remembered that the grandeur of *Wrapped Coast* shifted contemporary art sympathetically into the minds of Australians and, just as important, suggested to a new generation of local artists that they were not isolated. Thomas, then an adventurous young curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, wrote the key, cosmopolitan catalogue essay for the first Sydney Biennale; it was to be his vision of the 1979 Biennale that eventually prevailed over others. *Wrapped Coast*’s supporters, who included Belgiorno-Nettis, were also, later, Board members of the Biennale of Sydney. Kaldor had demonstrated two things: that there was considerable public interest in contemporary art that moved outside the boundaries of paintings on art museum walls; and that the international art world’s attention could be focused on a distant event given the right, adventurous programming. To achieve this double ambition, in 1975 the Sydney Biennale Board poached maverick curator Tom McCullough from his position as director of the Mildura Sculpturscape—a dramatically successful, spectacular triennial survey in a distant, small city in arid inland Australia—to direct the 1976 Biennale of Sydney.\(^8\) Despite Mildura’s huge distance from anywhere—it is nominally located between the three major population centres of Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne, but only in the sense that Santa Fe is between New York and Los Angeles—McCullough had established Mildura as the key exhibition of advanced art in Australia through an astute combination of insider word-of-mouth, inveterate travel, sheer energy, a close-knit group of artist advisers who talent-spotted for him, and a core group of dedicated assistants. His 1976 Biennale of Sydney, *Recent International Forms in Art*, was curated according to a capacious theme rather than a national typology and, further, it largely focused its rhetoric, though not in fact any genuine critical focus, on artists from Pacific Rim nations. This was dictated as much by the small budget for the inventive curator’s travel as by his ambition; biennial artist selection was, and often remains, opportunistic and dictated by the limitations of time and money, even if the results might be sometimes revelatory. McCullough recalled that,

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Artists who were extending three-dimensional ideas beyond the pedestal into installations, earth-works and performance art were regularly showing in Mildura by the 1975 Triennial, and I consulted them on new concepts, contacts and ideas for the upcoming Biennale. In 1976 I visited only two countries while preparing for the Biennale, as we didn't have much money. I was only allowed two weeks overseas so I decided to focus on a Pacific triangle.9

More recent directors of biennials have become famous for their itinerant nomadism, but McCullough relied on a small group of advisers from each region, including veteran expatriate curator John Stringer, based in New York, and Tommaso Trini, from the Italian art magazine, Data, to select the inclusions.10 Such curatorial delegation was also common in later biennials. The exhibition catalogue was equally frugal: the cheapest, one-colour printing on the cardboard cover, spiral-bound, brown paper pages, and dull monochrome illustrations. It looked like a down-market instruction manual. The conceptualist look was partly deliberate, not unmodish (it very consciously recalled the appearance of Szemann's *documenta 5* (1972) catalogue) and partly unavoidable, but the austere publication was, as with the absence of curatorial travel, a contrast with the future direction of biennials. At the time, to 1976 director Tom McCullough, the poor publication seemed adequate, looked appropriately austere and saved a lot of scant money.

**White Elephant or Red Herring?: The 1979 Biennale of Sydney**

The Third Biennale of Sydney in 1979 preserved the innovations of 1976, in particular the notion of a biennial shaped by a director, and it was in reality the first Sydney Biennale to grab any degree of international attention. At the same time, its audience numbers—almost exclusively local—also grew considerably. Both successes were the result of considerable calculation; the double-guessing was typical of this phase of regional biennials everywhere, and followed a series of symposia, meetings and public consultations that began at the conclusion of the 1976 Biennale and continued over the next year or so, in part as a way of road-testing the way forward, in part as an opportunity to audition the shortlist of prospective directors for 1979, in part in conformity to the 1970s penchant for consultation and collective processes and consensus, even if (as turned out) this was window-dressing. Englishman Nick Waterlow was one of those who presented a proposal for the next Biennale at a public meeting at Paddington.

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Town Hall, in inner city Sydney. A candidate for the Biennale directorship, he gave the impression that his Biennale would involve a substantial amount of community consultation and local artist selection:

The role of the Biennale coordinator and back-up staff should be to work very closely with a liaison group representing the various interests, including artists, performers, gallery people, industry, state, etc., government, community groups, students and sponsors. This would need to be carefully administered, but it is important the coordinator is in a real position to respond to ideas and suggestions and to ensure they are implemented where feasible. Unlike Venice or Sao Paulo, this could then make for a Creative Peoples Biennale while maintaining a high level of production, activity, ingenuity and dissemination—in other words a highly unique Sydney Biennale. The Biennale will succeed if it exists at three levels—community, national and international.\(^{11}\)

In effect, Waterlow wanted to create a Biennale that would be a popular exhibition for a regional public as well as the expression of local artists groups’ wishes for a fuller representation of Australians and women artists. It was to be a dialogue with living artists.\(^{12}\) This intention was potentially far more exclusive and expensive than local art activists realised at that moment.

Waterlow had curated no major exhibitions before his appointment as Artistic Director of the Third Sydney Biennale. He had been resident in Australia for a period in the 1960s, had moved back to London, where he worked with community arts organisations and their art spaces in Milton Keynes, a new, post-War project city outside London, before returning to Australia to teach curatorial studies in Paddington at one of Sydney’s three major art schools (a position he was to hold until his death). His directorship of the Biennale was accompanied by an often-intense hostility felt by many local artists towards the Biennale’s organisation and its directorship. The surprisingly cursory inclusion of Australian artists in McCullough’s previous Biennale, given his almost unique rapport with adventurous local artists, who he had closely consulted whilst at the same time steering his own course through the minefield of artist selection, had resulted in vocal public claims of an international bias against Australian artists. It slowly became evident, as Waterlow’s selections and Biennale press releases gradually became public, that the under-representation of women had continued. As Biennale Director, Waterlow was soon negotiating a maze of

\(^{11}\) Nick Waterlow presentation at Paddington Town Hall, Sydney, 21 July 1977, quoted in Binns, V., Milliss, I. and The Women’s Art Group, 1979, Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring. Comments from the Art Community 1979, Sydney, Union Media Services, p. 2; this essay is reprinted in Ian Milliss Retrospective Documents, Sydney, Millis, I. 2010, see http://www.ianmilliss.com/documents/historyherstory.htm (viewed 14 April 2010).

meetings and angry letters. Two groups of well-organised, vocal Sydney and Melbourne artists and critics threatened an artist boycott if demands for a 50 per cent representation of women, and a substantial representation of local artists and community arts were not met. The artist groups convened public meetings, lobbied funding bodies and frenetically agitated amongst and often against their interstate peers, publishing an illustrated, book-length manifesto against the biennial, *Sydney Biennale: White Elephant or Red Herring. Comments from the Art Community 1979.* This strongly resembled earlier Art & Language publications, which was no surprise since a key member of the New York chapter of Art & Language, Ian Burn, had returned to Australia a few years before and created a publishing collective with other artist-activists including Ian Milliss. Burn and Milliss contributed an essay, ‘Don’t moan, organise! (with apologies to Joe Hill),’ writing, ‘Events like the Sydney Biennale can be foisted off onto the art community in ways which poorly reflect our interests or needs. Because artists are powerless, structures like that of the Biennale, which assume to define the situation in which we all work, can be imposed on us.’ They wrote to Waterlow, ‘We cannot stress too strongly our concern that while a major international exhibition is to be held in Sydney, Australian artists are to appear in an ancillary, complementary way to an exhibition that should be highlighting and not downgrading their talents.’

The activist groups felt that the significant amount of public money spent—by Australian standards the biennial was a lavish event—underscored the lack of an Australian version of a Whitney Biennial, a national survey of artists. The Biennale Board disingenuously agreed. In a prompt reply to the Melbourne artist group, Franco Belgiorno-Nettis urged the group to lobby for an Australian biennial that, he suggested, might be held in Australia’s other large city and artistic hub, Melbourne, in alternate years to the Sydney Biennale. In the end, after discussions, remonstrances and reassurance, of the 62 individual artists that the activists counted, there were only 19 Australians. Of the 19 Australians, only five were women. There were only five women amongst the international artists. In all, as the Sydney activists angrily noted, there were only ten women included in the list of 62 artists they had from the Biennale Board. The focus was now firmly on ephemeral and relatively easily transported or assembled new art forms: on performances and installations rather than paintings. Significantly, the Australian representation included artists from regional and rural locations including, for the first time.

13 Binns et al., *Sydney Biennale,* p. 7.
14 Binns et al., *Sydney Biennale.*
15 Burn, I. and Milliss, I., ‘Don’t moan, organise! (with apologies to Joe Hill),’ in Binns et al., *Sydney Biennale,* p. 10.
16 J. Burke, J. Davis, L. Dumbrell, R. Jacks, P. Kennedy, R. Lindsay, J. Nixon and J. Watson, letter to Nick Waterlow, 11 September 1977, quoted in Binns et al., *Sydney Biennale,* p. 6; this letter was from the group of Melbourne-based artists and writers.
17 F. Belgiorno-Nettis, letter to Janine Burke, John Davis, Lesley Dumbrell, Robert Jacks, Peter Kennedy, Robert Lindsay, John Nixon and Jenny Watson, 26 September 1977, quoted in Binns et al., *Sydney Biennale,* p. 6.
in a major survey exhibition of contemporary art, paintings by Aboriginal artists from from north-east Arnhem Land, in Australia’s distant ‘Top End’. The Biennale’s vain struggle to mediate between local and international spheres was almost invisible to the audiences who arrived at the exhibition itself. They saw a continuum of messy, body-based contemporary art, of Marina Abramović and Ulay’s collaborative action, *The Brink* (1979), in the company of Mike Parr’s installation that incorporated performance documentation and photographs involving his whole extended family. Parr’s own, widely read commentary on the exhibition, ‘Parallel Fictions’, appeared in the country’s leading art magazine, *Art and Australia*. He focused on the emergence of a new, global language of post-studio contemporary art rather than on the statistics of artists’ inclusions and exclusions. The exhibition catalogue that accompanied the 1979 Biennale was not nearly as spartan as that of 1976, since biennial curators and artists alike were coming to feel that biennials deserved commemorating and that artists deserved better representation.

Waterlow pointedly titled his biennial *European Dialogue*, including no American artists and focusing on Europe. He was introducing Australians to a messier, more political, definitively post-1960s Europe, rather than the neat Parisian modernism and *tachist* abstractions of post-war French painting, a large exhibition of which had toured Australia in 1953. Exhibitions of recent American painting had, by now, toured Australia in 1958, 1964 and, most memorably, in 1967, courtesy of the remarkable Circulating Exhibitions Program of the quasi-autonomous International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibitions included *Two Decades of American Painting* (1967), *Some Recent American Art* (1974), and *Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse* (1975). *Some Recent American Art* focused on American minimalist and conceptualist sculptures and installations. Despite the relative contemporaneity of the latter exhibition, it was time, felt Waterlow, to shift attention away from America for several compelling reasons. *European Dialogue* recycled Harald Szeemann’s curatorial theme from the 1972 *documenta 5* of ‘individual mythologies’. But both this biennial and the large survey shows now appearing in Europe, such as the 1980 Venice Biennale, the 1981 London Royal Academy survey, *A New Spirit in Painting*, and the 1982 Berlin mega-exhibition, *Zeitgeist*, all excluded the outsider artists and the atlases of objects culled from mass culture that the maverick Swiss curator had included in *documenta 5*, and *European Dialogue* was no different. Szeemann’s capacious, catch-all, curatorial label, ‘individual mythologies’, was now beginning to be repackaged, especially in Europe, as a new direction in painting—as hyper-expressive, allegorical paintings that were about to be labeled neo-expressionist or transavantgarde—in large survey exhibitions around the world. This label occluded the degree to which the new painting had grown out of the second

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The Third Biennale of Sydney: ‘White Elephant or Red Herring?’

generation of conceptualist art, beginning to appear in Szeemann’s *documenta 5*, and much of which was now shown in Sydney in 1979. There was relatively little of the so-called new painting in the 1979 Biennale, apart from the scrawled symbols of German artist A.R. Penck, but much diaristic, semi-fictional and narrative photo-documentation and, of course, the Australian Aboriginal paintings. But Waterlow did include several of the European transavantgarde’s putative grandfather figures, including School of London survivor Howard Hodgkin, and German painter Gerhard Richter, active since the mid-1950s and already claimed by many art movements as a precursor. Waterlow remembered,

The concept and themes of the 1979 exhibition evolved from the range of new work that was coming out of Europe, that hadn’t been seen in Australia, which I knew about before moving to Australia in 1977. There had also been a couple of major American exhibitions here so there existed more of a need to show the European avant-garde in relation to Australia. The exhibition did bring a lot of postobject work that hadn't been seen before as well as artists like Marcel Broodthaers, Gerhard Richter, Hanne Darboven, Mario Merz, A. R. Penck, Valie Export, Daniel Buren and Armand Arman. There was also some terrific performance work from Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Jurgen Klauke, Ulrike Rosenbach and others.¹⁹

The idea of a ‘European dialogue’ reflected more than the conceit of a surfeit of American art; in his catalogue essay, Waterlow was reflecting the widespread doubt that New York remained the centre of the international contemporary art world for this was the period of the deepest Cold War, a phase in which American economic and political power was in decline. Jimmy Carter’s presidency and the Iranian Revolution were the backdrop to the 1979 Biennale, and a few months later the Iran Hostage Crisis unfolded. This was a period of pervasive anti-Americanism in the largely left-leaning worlds of both European and Australian contemporary art. Waterlow referred in his catalogue essay and in later recollections to the sequence of American exhibitions that had arrived in Sydney, Melbourne and other cities around the world and to his sense that a shift had occurred that Australia should take account of.²⁰ He wrote, ‘The most persuasive argument in favour of a European Dialogue is that it does at this time represent a genuine shift in creative emphasis. It is now accepted that remarkable work is likely to arise in Cracow [sic], Turin, Düsseldorf, Vienna, Paris, London or Amsterdam as in New York’.²¹ He was, in effect, attempting to revise art history much as many of his Sydney and Melbourne critics would

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²⁰ Conversation with Nick Waterlow, Sydney, May 2000, Green’s notes.
have liked, albeit stripped of their own Marxism and, more surprisingly, his own, egalitarian, community arts, non-curatorial background. After a couple of decades of intense American influence upon Australian art, he wished to revalue the direct links between Europe and Australia and the influence of European art on Australian art. This was evident in the show’s installation rather than in its catalogue, for its essays were cursory and under-theorised, compared with those of the 1988 Sydney Biennale, which he was also to curate, a mere decade later. Waterlow’s own, well-intentioned but very hasty 1979 essay was no exception, and his claims about the overweening shadow of American art were not completely true, nor did a turn from the US to Europe exactly capture the wave of the future or correctly encapsulate the recent past. An important solo exhibition of art by Marcel Duchamp, the grandfather of conceptualism, had toured Australia’s art museums in 1967–68; this had been initiated in New Zealand. Australian expatriate conceptual artists such as Ian Burn had long argued that a wider and more inclusive perspective should inflect the understanding of influence. And for Nick Waterlow’s 1988 Biennale of Sydney, ex-Art & Language leader Ian Burn (who had been one of the ringleaders of the agitation against Waterlow in the lead-up to the 1979 Biennale), contributed a major revisionist essay to the exhibition’s book setting out a different and highly significant framework—different both to MoMA’s and Harald Szeemann’s atlases of international art—for imagining Australian art’s participation in a global history of art, and thus that of any so-called peripheral art centre.

By the late 1970s, Sydney’s art world seemed to have reached a respectable if small critical mass in terms of self-sustaining size. The 1979 Biennale, in effect, began the process of self-consciously garnering to itself the role of international gatekeeper, a process initiated by its important predecessor of 1976. This intention—as much as showing a regional audience a smaller simulacrum of Venice or Documenta—was to underpin many regional biennials from this time on. The biennial’s Board was self-consciously setting its biennial and its curator up as the mediator, meeter-and-greeter between the international and national art worlds: as the point where the very different and separate international and national art worlds intersected. This was significant. The aim was to actually intervene in both international and Australian art: to represent each to the other; and to push to be part of a nascent network of globalised artist movements in which international artists would create new work in a regional location (the concept that Kaldor had fostered) and to create the networks that would allow Australian artists to participate in European biennials, and then definitely not as national exemplars. By 1979, the Sydney Biennale sought a

22 Conversation with Nick Waterlow, Sydney, May 2000, Green’s notes.
more ambitious regional and transcultural exchange than simply a curatorial selection of artists from across the world (the Venice model). Drawing together artists from across the globe (rather than from a particular idea of the central metropolis) was meant to spark new artistic dialogues between practitioners from hitherto disparate or even isolated contexts, rather than just to represent what was happening elsewhere to local audiences. Waterlow emphasised this in his short curatorial statement and, later, in retrospective interviews. He wrote, ‘It is to be hoped various artists and exhibitions exchange programs, as well as other avenues of interaction, will become more complex, as indeed they should’, and concluded his essay by re-emphasising the idea of artists’ ‘intercontinental dialogue.’

Waterlow invited many artists to Australia—including Jurgen Klauke, Klaus Rinke, Anne and Patrick Poirier and Marina Abramović/Ulay—hoping they would make new works for the occasion. The Biennale of Sydney flew the artists into Sydney, connected them with local hosts—with curators, artists or writers—and to local institutions such as art schools and their eager students. Abramović and Ulay, for instance, made a tantalising but frustrating tour to the Outback as well as to Melbourne, returning for a much longer visit in 1981 with an Outback visit that changed the course of their art and the meditative work that resulted, Nightsea Crossing: Gold Found by the Artists. This featured the pair sitting opposite each other for eight hours each day in an Art Gallery of New South Wales national survey exhibition, staring at each other. Two years later, in 1983, in a later iteration of Nightsea Crossing (subtitled Conjunction), at Amsterdam’s Sonesta Koepelzaal, the artists sat for seven hours over four days with Charlie Tararu Tjungurrayi, with whom they had become very close during their second visit to Australia and who flew willingly to Amsterdam for the performance, and also with another friend, a Tibetan lama.

Beyond the aspiration that artists would make important works in Australia, the Biennale’s international visitor program predicated a substantial dialogue with local artists, students and curators that extended beyond Sydney. With Biennale-supplied air tickets that routinely specified one Australian destination in addition to Sydney, artists often made at least one extra stop in another Australian city, speaking in local studio art schools or universities. Later Sydney Biennales continued to prioritise flying the participating international artists to art schools and universities beyond Sydney. Other visiting artists took time out to sun themselves on white, sandy beaches, at least until the arrival of more harassed schedules during the 1990s, from which point it became normal for artists to fly in, install their works, and quickly fly out for the next biennial engagement. At this point, and amidst the financial uncertainty that afflicted

25 The work had been commissioned by the Museum Foder (a branch of the Stedelijk Museum); for a detailed description and a critical analysis of the ethics of cross-cultural collaboration within contemporary art, see Green, C. 2004, ‘Group Soul: Who Owns the Artist Fusion?’, Third Text, vol. 18, no. 71, November, pp. 595–608.
the Sydney Biennale during the mid-1990s, such highly organised expectations of substantial artist dialogue petered out and visits to other art centres, if they occurred, which was less and less, were not organised or funded by the Biennale.

Import/Export Trade

Inherent in the aspiration to dialogue is the presumption that biennials have an affective, transformational power, not just for the careers of the invited artists, but also in the world picture of what is both global art and national art. The 1979 Biennale of Sydney, like almost all important biennials from the mid-1970s onwards, sought to intervene as well as to reflect.

The key to the success of a gatekeeper event was to be the invited, auteur curator who owed little or nothing to the local host art museum or Kunsthalle, and in fact was probably a complete outsider to local art museums, but who would have access to international networks of artists, or who would know precisely who to ask for that advice. In other words, Tom McCullough in 1976 and now Nick Waterlow in 1979 had thoroughly internalised the auteur curator model of Harald Szeemann, even if they were hindered by a lack of resources. Both had successfully adapted Szeemann’s improvisatory but highly centralised Documenta method, with a dedicated group of talent scouts and committed advisers rather than a team of professionals backed by proper resources. McCullough recalled, ‘I had virtually no staff. It was Tom McCullough, full stop, for most of 1976 and one really had to get on with the professional staff of the gallery.’ Waterlow was forced to accept the same approach as McCullough due to short-staffing and scant resources but, like McCullough, he was able to rely on the spaces—the white cubes—and the highly professional installation and security staff of a major art museum, the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This was crucial, if in the future sometimes very reluctantly offered. For the AGNSW, the Biennale meant ceding control of its exhibition spaces during a peak period of the calendar to an external curator working beyond the museum’s control. São Paulo, by contrast, was almost from its outset housed in an expansive, late modernist Oscar Niemeyer-designed building adequate to its great ambitions and marked by vast sight-lines. The Biennale of Sydney’s venues were, quite simply, less suitable for the often outsized, unconventional works that artists were increasingly planning and which Biennial directors wished to include. The later 1986 and 1988 Sydney Biennales, which were also directed by Nick Waterlow, made use of an extra venue, Pier 2/3, a gargantuan timber structure like a vast ex-industrial loft thrust out over the cold, blue waters of Sydney Harbour itself. This provided rough, industrial spaces of enormous proportions

for large installations. It was immensely atmospheric, bitterly cold during Sydney’s winter storms, and unexpectedly expensive to fit out and make safe. By 1990, space emerged as a major problem. René Block, director of that year’s Sydney Biennale, was forced to make major cuts to his exhibition. A substantial part of his deeply cosmopolitan, Fluxus-oriented biennial—in Block’s words, a ‘well-curated historical exhibition on the topic of the readymade’—remained in shipping containers even while the AGNSW launched a large exhibition by a popular but, from the point of view of younger artists and critics engaged with new art forms, deeply conservative local hero, painter Brett Whiteley. His large, fairly conventional and eclectic paintings of sojourns in Paris and memories of Sydney Harbour occupied the exhibition spaces not allocated to the Biennale; Block tactfully reminisced, ‘However, constant budget cuts forced me to merge the two into a single exhibition, which turned out okay in the end.’

The Biennale of Sydney’s problems arose from its origins. Sydney’s chronic disorganisation, sometimes erratic timing (in the 1970s it was triennial), lack of money and a consistent record of secrecy and rationing of information to the public were the unintended products of a tiny, idealistic, semi-private operation, operating in an ambiguous zone between public and private. Apart from Transfield’s continuing sponsorship, the Biennale of Sydney was hindered by inadequate local funding as well as a precarious hold on its exhibition spaces: the former was alleviated by a dramatic increase in Federal Government funding in time for the 2006 Biennale; the latter was ameliorated by the Biennale’s consolidation in the harbourside Museum of Contemporary Art and the colonisation from 2008 onwards of a spectacular and immensely popular new site, a derelict shipyards on Cockatoo Island in the middle of Sydney Harbour. Freight costs always restricted the movement of large exhibitions into the southern hemisphere. So, for years, participating countries contributed a large part of the Biennale’s operating costs by underwriting individual artists, usually without the control that national pavilions would have given them. 1982 Sydney Biennale director William Wright observed, ‘The problem has been building a funding base’, remembering that foreign government arts agencies’ support often amounted to up to 60 per cent of the Biennale’s budget, and guessed that Sydney survived on between 5–10 per cent of the operating budget of the Biennale of Venice. So, an exhibition of international impact and representation was put together on a very small budget, though that budget, as we have seen, seemed large and even recklessly spent to many local artists.

Waterlow went on to be sole artistic director of the Sydney Biennale two more times, in 1986 and 1988, as a co-director in 2000, and to serve on the Biennale’s powerful Board for decades. He was murdered in tragic circumstances in 2009. From the early 1990s on, the Biennale of Sydney was to move into a confusing and more contradictory place in both Australian and international art as an under-funded but spectacular event focused on Euramerica with a smattering of Australian artists, whereas the first Biennales of Sydney, two decades before, had aspired to a more generous Asian focus than their successors. However, the extraordinarily ambitious Asia-Pacific Triennial (APT), based in the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) in subtropical Brisbane, a large provincial capital several hundred kilometres north of Sydney, was to fill a more important regional role after 1993. The APT’s team of curators, led by recently appointed QAG director Doug Hall and curator Caroline Turner, had quickly identified the Pacific and the emerging artistic scene of Asia as APT’s sole focus. APT found itself more or less immediately in competition with the Fukuoka, Yokohama and Gwangju biennials, well before the launch of a host of more recent Asian biennials. None of the these four large biennials followed the Havana biennial model—low budget, bricolage, defiantly Third World—though smaller biennials such as Dacca, in Bangladesh, went down that road. The 1992 Biennale of Sydney—*The Boundary Rider*, directed by Anthony Bond, a chief curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales—was the last Biennale of Sydney of any artistic significance to North Atlantic audiences until a substantial injection of government money enabled more generous and serious exhibitions: curator Charles Merewether’s 2006 Biennale of Sydney, ‘Zones of Contact’ and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s 2008 Biennale, ‘Revolutions: Forms That Turn’ were once again major biennials shaped by well-connected directors who could leverage important loans from European and North American collectors and the artists’ galleries in order to mirror a world picture based decisively on the emerging contemporaneity that had come to define contemporary art.

**Conclusion**

After 1979, the Sydney Biennale had become Australia’s mediator with the global—or more accurately the ‘global’ art world of Europe and North America. There were no more extraordinary exhibitions from MoMA’s International Council, nor would they have been received as such. But there was a certain lack of reciprocity in this development: the global did not actually need to come to Australia, even if the compensation was a trip to a balmy, subtropical, Southern Hemisphere city by the water, to a site as visually spectacular as Rio or the Biennale’s original referent, Venice. Conspiratorial though it sounds, the Euramerican, North Atlantic centre just did not need to conduct a dialogue with
the provincial even in the former’s initially grudging but by 1979 avid admission of the
global. A biennial would never be an agent of change itself, for no clear
consensus about political or community art in a period of change and upheaval
such as 1979 was possible anyway, if biennials were dependent upon peak art
museums such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which for better or worse
were the bastions of entrenched local privilege as well as professionalism. Art
museums in relatively small art worlds were, it seemed to radical critics, bound to
infantilise their audiences, shoe-horning them into one of two categories: either
the capacious strait-jackets of the few, cosseted insiders at exclusive, invitation-
only events in which global visitors encountered their peers; or else into the
constricting, conservative demands of the imaginary common man or woman
posited by populist and provincial newspaper reviewers, who obdurately
refused the world picture of contemporaneity. But the 1979 biennial, we would
say, at least aspired to escaping this double bind in the developing image of a
globalised artistic contemporaneity—manifest in the concept of dialogue, in
Waterlow’s hope that invited artists would realise new works on the ground
in Sydney in cooperation with locals—rather than the image of a vanguard.
The third Bienal de la Habana, of 1989, is widely taken within the critical and
rapidly-emerging area of exhibition histories to have inaugurated a new mode of
exhibition-making in which the concept of artist dialogue was paramount.29 We
suggest that the Third Biennale of Sydney, of 1979, which pre-dated the Bienal de
la Habana by a decade, deserves global acknowledgement for its understanding
that two of the images of contemporaneity which a biennial would henceforth
embody—and which would become key tropes of global contemporary art—
would be dialogue and collaboration in place of the image of a vanguard. Artist
collaborations inevitably foreground the overarching field of world memory,
and post-studio, cross-cultural artist collaborations have become a special—and
symptomatic—case of this in the field of contemporary art.

At a time when regional artists were working in a cultural geography of
destabilised but still crushingly hegemonic centre/periphery relationships,
the 1979 Biennale offered a confusing, sometimes inspirational and apparently
contradictory place for local artists. For them, it brought welcome news in
the form of recent, major works by international artists but it also brought an
infuriating exclusion from their circles for the number of local artists was a small
percentage of the exhibitors and the visitors were often carefully chaperoned or
had set themselves over-optimistically tight schedules, oblivious to the 24 hours
flight time from Europe or New York. The issue of artists and audiences for
biennials in regional centres went further than artists’ concerns about exclusion
and lack of representation to the deeper question of whether something other
than a token link between local and international art was possible. Local artist

organisations and activist collectives had wondered in 1979 if the picture of a globally focused biennial was worthwhile. If the Sydney Biennale continued to occupy its particular import/export niche, importing Euramerican art and attempting to host a dialogue with that military-industrial complex, they had argued, such a small, under-funded Sydney Biennale was not going to do anything else other than passively conduct international fame, style and art-world glamour. The 1979 Biennial’s problems were to be replicated in the short-lived Johannesburg Biennial during the mid-1990s, and both Sydney and Johannesburg struggled with the issue of local relevance, or the question of whom a biennial is for. The global and provincial art economies, both of which the Sydney Biennale sought to include, have consistently proved to be almost intractably and mutually exclusive.
The Challenge of Uninvited Guests: Social Art at The Blue House

Zara Stanhope

*The Blue House* was an ambitious and multifaceted social art project conceived and conducted by Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk from mid-2005.¹ The project involved artists and others undertaking social art research practices to investigate the then newly established, highly planned neighbourhood of IJburg in Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands. In this paper I examine how *The Blue House* illustrates the potential of sociality in art by encouraging engagement with others, and thereby ultimately fostering world-making relations through diverse intersections of art and daily life. I will argue that as art, *The Blue House* makes evident the relational nature of the world that scholar Sen-Ami Scharpstein locates both within the individual and across the globe at large.² In this sense, I examine how *The Blue House* encouraged individual capacity for agency or making worlds in the relations and creative projects established between individuals, but also how, beyond the local, members of *The Blue House* also engaged social issues of global significance, such as the effects of global capitalism and significance of notions of citizenship and personal sovereignty in a progressively interconnected world. In generating temporary interventions into everyday life, I highlight how *The Blue House* evidences artists exploring their personal capacity for world-making, and social art practice ‘becoming art of the world’; following art historian Terry Smith’s definition of contemporary art.³ In becoming art of the world, I also show how the resident artists were unintentionally implicated in areas of state social policy, and creative industry imperatives. As such, this essay provides a rare opportunity to observe the local and global intersections between art, state and industry through a social art lens that is *The Blue House*.

Social Art

Nicholas Bourriaud’s proposition of relational aesthetics in his book *Esthétique relationnelle* was a catalyst for renewed interest in the theory and practice of

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¹ *Het Blauwe Huis* operated from June 2005 to December 2009.
social art at the turn of the twenty-first century. Bourriaud located art taking the form of social relations as both the means and ends of art. He contended the sociality of audiences, interacting to form micro-communities, offered an alternative political model for the hyper-connected globalised world where economic and legal systems and the mass media have primacy over social and civic connections. Bourriaud’s ideas contributed to new developments in art theory, particularly the development of critical aesthetics that analyses audience involvement in ‘social art’ in terms of models of communality or avant-garde tactics.

‘Relational art’, and similar forms of ‘participatory art’ and ‘social art’, have become prominent in art since the 1990s. Social art appears in gallery and public spaces, and is often commissioned within larger art events. Definitions of various sub-forms of social art have arisen in response to Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. In this essay I identify the key developments in social art that provide a framework for understanding The Blue House.

In the United States, from the late 1980s, artist Suzanne Lacy’s ‘new genre public art’ explored social issues of marginalisation and discrimination in local communities. Lacy associated her practice with the performative art of her mentor Allan Kaprow, and also with the new forms of public/site specific art curated by Mary Jane Jacob. In contrast to the amelioration of social issues in art, in Europe the emphasis on the politics of participation has been identified in the curation of the exhibition Kontextkunst, Kunst der 90er Jahre by Peter Weibel. The burgeoning practices of social art continue to stimulate critical responses from art historians and theorists, in which the key figures, predominantly Claire Bishop, Grant Kester and Claire Doherty, have interpreted social art through theories of alternative politics and personal ethics.

The political context of The Blue House project as social art originates with Jeanne van Heeswijk’s twenty year involvement with social art in urban communities. The Blue House project was new in engaging with the unique social and urban

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4 Bourriaud, N. 2002, Relational Aesthetics [Esthétique relationnelle], trans. S. Pleasance and F. Woods, Dijon, Les presses du réel. The Happenings organised by American artist Allan Kaprow, and many of the ideas of the Situationist International formed in Europe in the late 1950s, or the social sculpture of Joseph Beuys initiated in the 1970s, are understood as precedents for social art of the 1990s.


6 Kontextkunst–Kunst der 90er Jahre [Context Art –Art of the 90s] was exhibited at the Neue Galerie im Kunsterhaus Graz, Austria in 1993.


circumstances of IJburg as a man-made extension of Amsterdam into the bordering lake, as well as with the global connectivity of the Netherlands as a function of its nation status. The project achieved notable outcomes within the realm of social art and its emancipatory politics. However, while ambitiously aiming for autonomy from state accountability, The Blue House revealed an unintended intersection between social creative practice, and state and commercial concerns. In the following, I will demonstrate how The Blue House evidences the potential of individual relations as creative responses to context. This, I argue, stands in contrast to the autonomous democratic communicative action or avant-garde oppositionality proposed for social art by art historians such as Bourriaud and Bishop.9

The Effect of World Connectivity on the Netherlands

The Blue House was situated on Harbour Island (Haveneiland), the largest of the eight artificial islands that comprise the IJburg district in Amsterdam. City planners conceived the concept of the islands in 1996 as part of the policy to create 70,000 new homes by 2030.10 The population growth in the Netherlands is partly a legacy of the colonisation undertaken for trade from the seventeenth century, subsequent immigration policies, and the continued desire to attract corporate business as the nation engages as a neoliberal economy in global capitalism. Alongside the high priority given to local social welfare remaining from the national emphasis on social policy post-war, the Netherlands subscribes to global capitalism as a modern industrialised nation. The country fulfils the definition of economic globalism in being open to the world market and the internationalisation of private property, facilitating the mobility of resources, investments, labour, profits, and adhering to the primacy of the law and judicial system, while prioritising civic and political rights.11 Ultimately IJburg was part of intentions to reinvigorate Amsterdam’s edge in pursuit of competitiveness.

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10 de Rooy, F., Val, W. and Vierboom, G. 2002, IJburg in uitvoering 8:2, Amsterdam, De Zuiderkerk, pp. 23–4; and, de Lange, L. and Milanovic, M. 2009, De afronding van IJburg, PlanAmsterdam 2, 15:2 Amsterdam, Dienst Ruimtelijke Ordening, pp. 27–8. The Netherlands returned to a policy of increasing inner city density in the late 1990s, after previously encouraging the working population to move out of Amsterdam to new suburbs and towns such as Almere.
11 Global capitalism or economic globalisation defined in Boaventure de Sousa Santos, 2006, ‘Globalizations’ Theory Culture Society, vol. 23, pp. 393–4. The strong state concern for social rights in the Netherlands post World War II meant it did not adhere to the weak state ‘Washington consensus’ model of globalisation with low priority given to social welfare policies. The Netherlands organised itself as welfare state society post World War II replacing the pillarised society of co-existing ideologies that previously provided many social and cultural services.
as a global city in financial and business services. Plans for the city’s global positioning include developing a ‘five star’ business district along the city’s south access, and constructing a Manhattan style metropolis on the banks of the IJmeer to easily facilitate business, investors, employees and tourism activities including IJburg.

With the influx of immigrants over the last 30 years the population density has swollen dramatically, generating significant constraints in the Netherlands. Formative for IJburg and The Blue House was the arrival of one million immigrants primarily from the former South-American Dutch colony of Suriname, Indonesia, as well as Turkish and Moroccan workers being upgraded to permanent settlement. The establishment of IJburg therefore reflects both global corporatism and the instrumental role of the government in social services and urban planning. IJburg was part of an estimated 750,000 new affordable, suburban housing units proposed in 1993 to accommodate population growth over the ensuing two decades.

As a flagship development, IJburg affords the city’s global competitive position by providing (upper middle class) owner-occupied housing and at the same time enables the Netherlands government to implement social and cultural blending through social housing as a policy priority. The initial two islands were planned to comprise 18,000 homes for 45,000 residents, numerous cultural and service facilities, and an anticipated provision of 12,000 jobs by 2013. However, at the time The Blue House was initiated, the Amsterdam Projectburo—the city planning authority and administrative body of IJburg—had slowed the pace of development as a result of ING Real Estate having withdrawn from the

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12 In contrast to the Netherlands’ seventeenth century ‘Golden Age’ that was based on the international trade undertaken by the Dutch East and West India Companies with the territories encountered during exploratory sea voyages.


14 In 2006 the ‘foreign population’ comprised 19 per cent of the total Netherlands population (16.3 million), with just more than half from non-Western backgrounds. Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2006, Cultural Policy in the Netherlands, The Hague, p. 21. The impact of immigration included unemployment rates between 7–6 per cent of employable population during 2004–2006.

15 A large number of Dutch national Surinamese immigrated after Suriname gained independence in 1975. Turkish and Moroccan immigrants were recruited to work in the country from the mid-1970s. Dutch population statistics (2008 est.) were: Dutch 80.7 per cent, EU 5 per cent, Indonesian 2.4 per cent, Surinamese 2 per cent, Moroccan 2 per cent, Caribbean 0.8 per cent, other 4.8 per cent, according to Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, viewed 8 November 2011, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/nl.html

16 This is despite restraint in welfare state governance from the 1980s to counter national cost expansion in the 1970s. Apart from social intervention, Dutch urban policy is a mechanism used to accommodate workers near industrial zones, and in flood prevention (as nearly half the country is below sea and river level).

17 The VINEX (Vierde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening Extra) guidelines for redevelopment of existing centres was established by the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, in 1993.

Private Public Partnership. Other private companies took over construction and consequently the Projectburo’s influence on building was diluted and aspects of development were delayed.\textsuperscript{19}

IJburg is a unique reclamation project. Every square metre of public and private space was predesigned by the city Projectburo with an absolute level of bureaucratic control described by David Harvey as ‘neoliberalised urban authoritarianism’.\textsuperscript{20} The Projectburo plans included a beach, harbour, marina, park, nature reserves, shops and a community centre, to be established when the population reached target numbers. However, many of these facilities and more than half of the expected 12,000 jobs on IJburg were delayed until the second phase of island construction, also deferred from 2010, and yet to begin when the research was undertaken.\textsuperscript{21}

**The Blue House (Het Blauwe Huis)**

Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk, with two other collaborators, established a base for researching, questioning and intervening in the pre-planned urbanism of IJburg during its construction.\textsuperscript{22} IJburg came to van Heeswijk’s attention when she was invited by the city to undertake another project in the area.\textsuperscript{23} She declined this invitation but in 2005, van Heeswijk negotiated to have a villa, an exceptionally large home with a distinctive blue exterior, removed from the housing market until 2009.\textsuperscript{24} This villa became known as The Blue House.

The Blue House is situated at the centre of Block 35 on Haveneiland. The house is surrounded by private homes, social accommodation, rental units designed for all ages and stages of life, as well as housing for a religious community. The Projectburo planned to attract over 102 nationalities to IJburg on completion.\textsuperscript{25} Hence, Block 35 included ‘poor people, rich people, families, singles and couples, white people, black people all together’ within a 50 metre span according to resident Marius Knulst, in ‘houses worth 700,000 euros … [that] people rent

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\textsuperscript{19} Igor Roovers interview with the author, 21 May 2010.  
\textsuperscript{20} Harvey, D. 2000, *Spaces of Hope*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.  
\textsuperscript{21} Roovers interview with the author, 21 May 2010.  
\textsuperscript{22} Dennis Kaspori (architect) and Herve Paraponaris (artist) were close collaborators with van Heeswijk on the direction of The Blue House. The house was designed by Teun Koolhaas Associates.  
\textsuperscript{23} Van Heeswijk was invited to apply for a grant from the Amsterdam Fonds voor de Kunsten (Amsterdam Funds for the Arts) to propose public artwork for Block 35 or IJburg. O’Neill, P., and O’Doherty, C. (eds) 2011, *Locating the Producers, Durational Approaches to Public Art*, Amsterdam, Valiz, p. 22.  
\textsuperscript{24} Unsold during development, de Alliante Housing Corporation agreed the house be used for five years for cultural activities in exchange for payment of the mortgage rent. The Blue House was established as a foundation, with van Heeswijk as an adviser.  
\textsuperscript{25} de Lange, L. and Milanovic, M., 2009 *PlanAmsterdam, De afronding van IJburg* 2, p. 27.
for 400 euros a month’. 26 On establishment, *The Blue House* was the only social space on the island, apart from a ‘shop’ unassociated with the project, operating out of a tent for a few hours a day. 27

*Pump up The Blue, 2007, Herve Paraponaris, with Recycloop architects at The Blue House (Het Blauwe Huis).*

Photograph by Ramon Mosterd. Image courtesy Jeanne van Heeswijk

27 Member Daniela Paes Leão noted that there was no community structure, no places to meet, and that people didn’t know each other or have a social conscience, in Daniela Paes Leão, ‘Letter’, *The Blue House*, viewed 23 June 2010, http://www.blauwehuis.org/blauwehuisv2/?news_id=1917
In *The Blue House* van Heeswijk offered a base for responsive investigations into IJburg that questioned the effect of the specific nature of IJburg’s built environment on the lives of residents. Van Heeswijk encouraged these ‘fields of interaction’ offering financial support to facilitate short and long term engagements with the project and its residents. The organisation of *The Blue House* comprised one aspect of the research project for van Heeswijk. In addition, van Heeswijk recruited ‘members’ to form the ‘Blue House Housing Association for the Mind’ as the self-organised network and structure for key decision-making in the project.

In terms of the membership of the project, some had previously collaborated with van Heeswijk, while others were invited on the grounds of art practices or interests in urbanism or social infrastructure. The fluctuating membership comprised local and international artists, art theorists, curators, a philosopher, a writer, artist and architect collectives, students, a sociologist, a number of IJburg inhabitants and the European Cultural Foundation. For members outside Amsterdam, the main benefit was the right to stay in the House for up to a total of six months on the condition of sharing ‘research’ with the other members. IJburg residents whose proposals were found relevant to the research purpose also became members of *The Blue House*.

For van Heeswijk, financial autonomy was a significant factor in the independence of the project. Van Heeswijk refused financial support offered by the City of Amsterdam and the IJburg Projectburo, finding financial and in-kind support from sources not associated with the normative intervention or accountability she associated with cultural funding. Members could also bring additional funds for their project or utilise the house as a partner in fundraising.

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28 For example, van Heeswijk swapped roles with member, Igor Dobricic, the arts program officer at the European Cultural Foundation, a funder of *The Blue House*, to understand how exchange between artists and foundations could be more than symbolic. She also established the legal and operational structure for *The Blue House* project.

29 Members mostly lived beyond Amsterdam, predominantly in the Netherlands and Europe.

30 Members suggested other colleagues, however, van Heeswijk had final say in the membership according to Marianne Maasland interviewed by Paul O’Neill ‘Locating the Producers, Case Study One—The Blue House’, 12 April 2008, p. 5, unpublished.

31 There were 51 members, which included 22 artists or art collectives. In addition, 36 students from MaHKU, Utrecht were involved in projects as part of their studies with Henk Slager, Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori. O’Neill and O’Doherty (eds), *Locating the Producers*, p. 10.

32 Most members divided the six months into shorter periods, according to house manager Irene den Hartoog, in Paul O’Neill interviews with Irene den Hartoog and Daniela Paes Leão Paul, ‘Locating the Producers, Case Study One—The Blue House’, 12 March 2008, p. 3, unpublished.

33 Project proposals had to demonstrate specific relevance to van Heeswijk’s brief. One artist was removed for ideas that did not comply with the purpose and open form of the membership, in Jeanne van Heeswijk interview with the author, 17 June 2011.

34 In association with the foundation, van Heeswijk raised funding for artists’ fees, the house mortgage interest and other costs. Members were supplied with 6,000 euros (1,200 per month of residency) and travel costs. Funds and in-kind support were sourced from the European Council Foundation (ECF), Amsterdam Funds for the Arts (AFK), de Alliante (Private Housing Corporation), the Mondriaan Foundation and the Prince Bernhard Culture Fund. Also Stitching DOENand VSB Fonds according to O’Neill and O’Doherty, *Locating the Producers*, p. 30.
Understanding how Projectburo planning had overlooked needs for productive social life in the first phase of IJburg formed principal motivation for The Blue House – and in particular, the project’s research into the ‘unplanned’, as van Heeswijk described it. The research or social art of members also resisted and was to influence urban policy, as described by member Igor Dobricic who discussed how The Blue House aimed to ‘make a hole’ in the density of the social engineering through which other things might emerge. Members had complete latitude to research the unplanned situations independent of critical or curatorial guidance, and employed idiosyncratic heuristic methodologies to engage with neighbours. Van Heeswijk and her collaborators considered members’ projects addressed three broad themes: questions of how history, instant urbanism (or immediate responses to necessities for daily life), and hospitality might be created.

Connectivity in New Urban Planning

The various forms of research arose from members’ responses to personal connections and individual communications with IJburg neighbours and residents. In its first years the house was open to visitors two days a week. Despite living in full view of neighbours at the centre of Block 35, members admitted to being challenged as to how to interact with IJburg residents, busy with their daily lives. Invitations were extended to the neighborhood residents from The Blue House—face-to-face, by flyers and digital media, and through the press—to attend meetings and events, to use rooms within the house as flexible spaces, or to come and socialise over coffee. The house was also a repository for information on IJburg. That The Blue House was an art and not a community project raised a great deal of interest across Amsterdam, and confounded residents with unconventional ideas of art.

Some of the outcomes generated through projects conducted by members, in consultation with Block 35 residents, included: gathering information and leading public discussions from the house and in the media; running workshops for locals, teaching, coordinating and producing projects ranging from films, a provisional motel, and outdoor cinema, to a restaurant and libraries; and providing boat and bike transport. Social processes were both fieldwork research and individual responses to IJburg life. In the following section I give a short

36 Daniela Paes Leão interview with the author, 22 May 2010.
37 Van Heeswijk and the live-in house manager who replaced her after six months, Irene den Hartoog, were proactive in engaging with neighbours. The Blue House also attracted hundreds of curious visitors on weekends, according to van Heeswijk, in Jeanne van Heeswijk interview with the author, 17 June 2011.
overview of a selection of projects that indicate the multiple and contingent forms in which the potential for personal agency and connectivity through intersubjective world-making was generated by members and residents.

A number of members approached the research question sociologically, documenting subjective histories of a new place. Ella Gibbs and Amy Plant interviewed Projectburo planners and workers building the island. Their film, *IJbuild*, offered a sense of the global origins and vast amount and range of material and personnel involved in the construction. Art historian Marianne Maasland and sociologist Marga Wijman conducted periodic surveys of residents’ responses to the ongoing transformation of local public spaces. Mauricio Corbalán and Pio Torroja of architecture collective m7red organised a series of conversations on the notion of public space, entitled ‘Chat Theatre’, which addressed subjects ranging from citizenship and immigration to the role of new media in public space. Participants in Porto Alegre joined the dialogues by means of software developed by the collective.\(^\text{38}\)

*Children’s Library (Leesjebblauw), 2009, Marthe van Eerdt with Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori at *The Blue House* (*Het Blauwe Huis*).*

Image courtesy Jeanne van Heeswijk

\(^{38}\) See http://www.blauwehuis.org/blauwehuis2/?project_id=17 viewed 23 August 2011.
Chat Theater, 2006, m7red with Jeanne van Heeswijk at The Blue House (Het Blauwe Huis).

Image courtesy Jeanne van Heeswijk

As urban researchers, Transparadiso (artist Barbara Holub and architect Paul Rajakovics) with Timon Woongroep conducted interviews with residents and reacted to the sense of betrayal that development had blocked and enclosed the once expansive lakeside atmosphere of the IJmeer. With residents from Block 35, they built a 12-metre high periscope on a roof terrace for public use which they entitled, View-On! (2009), and designed a new housing block model entitled, Blue Fiction—The Blue Block (An Anachronistic Centre), based on members’ visions and existing plans. As a consequence, residents petitioned the Projectburo regarding future building. Other responses arising from listening to residents’ ideas of the ‘unplanned’ included an environmentally-friendly motel entitled Autohotel (2007) organised by Evelien de Munck Mortier. The motel took the form of customers’ parked cars that were fitted out for sleeping, and the use of bathrooms and lounges in the homes of residents.

Rudy J. Luijter’s edible Public Garden (Publieke moestuin) (2006–9) was a communal project for the residents of Block 35, and a response by the artist to the unplanned fencing of public space by residents. To add functional space

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39 The periscope on Maria Austriastraat comprised a collaboration with Anjo and Aline Terpstra of Timon Woongroep, and was open to the public on weekends.
to the *The Blue House* itself, Herve Paraponaris instigated *Pump Up the Blue* in 2007, a scaffold structure built around and above the house. The room built across the roof provided an interim space for a youth program run in cooperation with local teenagers, the *Chill-ROOM*, until the planned youth centre became available. This initiative led to Block 35 residents overcoming their antipathy towards teenagers, who had been given bad press on the island, and finally supporting the weekly operation of the *Chill-ROOM* over the 2008–09 period. Subsequently, a care facility was set up providing formal activities for teenagers, and the official community centre development was brought forward to 2009 from the scheduled 2012 opening.  

*Flowers for IJburg* (*Bloemen voor IJburg*), 2005, Nicoline Koek with Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori at *The Blue House* (*Het Blauwe Huis*).

Image courtesy Jeanne van Heeswijk

40 The *Chill-ROOM* was instigated by Ingrid Meus, a student in a public art course run by van Heeswijk, one of a number of classes held at *The Blue House*. The program was operated by a social worker. Van Heeswijk interview with the author, 17 June 2011.

41 The presence of youth on the island and at *The Blue House* in Block 35 raised heated local debate with residents, noted by Denis Kaspori in Paul O’Neill interviews ‘Locating the Producers, Case Study One—The Blue House’, 12 March 2008, p. 5, unpublished. Block 35 residents nearly did not approve of *Pump Up the Blue* and the *Chill-ROOM* but gave their permission and some residents even contributed equipment once the program was operating, according to van Heeswijk in Jeanne van Heeswijk interview with the author, 17 June 2011.
Van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori activated and facilitated a number of projects engaging with opportunities or activities perceived as absent from IJburg. They assisted Nicoline Koek to overcome inflexible trading laws and establish her flower stand, Flowers for IJburg (Bloemen voor IJburg), in the eight square metres of private land in the front of The Blue House. Operating each Saturday from 2005 to 2007, the flower stand became an icon in the district and was much appreciated by residents for brightening up their environment both visually and as a point of social contact.\(^{42}\)

Local resident Maarthe van Eerdt was allocated the largest room in the house to provide a weekly children’s library (the official children’s library was planned for the 2008 forecasted population). Another resident initiated a book exchange for adults (in advance of the official service planned for 50 years hence). The Blue House members later assisted these activities to relocate to other local spaces.\(^{43}\) In 2006, van Heeswijk’s and Kaspori’s urbanism project also addressed the lack of a social or community ‘restaurant’ on the island, by offering an affordable catered meal once a week at the Community Restaurant or Proeflokaal (2006).\(^{44}\)

The projects conducted at The Blue House highlighted gaps in institutional planning, demonstrated local social attitudes, and created debate about the role of art in society. Many projects at The Blue House were relevant to global and local political and social environments in researching the nature of hospitality, understood as the relations between the guests and host that include the ethics of respect for strangers. A small number of new residents vocalized their outrage at finding their new neighbourhood contained members of immigrant populations and an emergence of associated social issues they had expected to escape by moving to IJburg. For despite the former reputation of Holland as a relatively tolerant, pluralistic society,\(^{45}\) at the time of The Blue House project, social attitudes in the Netherlands had shifted. The change in cultural attitudes was typified by politician Pim Fonteyn’s prominent anti-

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\(^{43}\) According to Igor Roovers interviewed by Paul O’Neill ‘Locating the Producers’ 1 December 2007, p. 7, unpublished. Nicoline Koek’s flower shop ‘bloem & zee’ continues today, as does the well-used children’s library.

\(^{44}\) Proeflokaal operated in association with Stichting Voorportall, Stichting Dienstveriening, Zorg IJburg and a catering service, to offset more than 12 months wait for the community service restaurant. See Van Heeswijk, Systems, p. 395.

\(^{45}\) Pluralism and participation were promoted as Dutch values by the government, along cultural, geographical and class lines during the 1970s, and subsequently in a liberal approach to drugs, gay marriage and euthanasia.
immigration platform prior to his assassination in 2002. Newspaper reports of IJburg residents’ complaints against Moroccan neighbours followed the racial and religious (Islamic) discrimination evident in the shooting of Theo van Gogh by Mohammed Bouyeri in November 2004. Such tensions and lack of tolerance have global echoes particularly after 9/11.

Activist member Jo van der Speck invited undocumented immigrant Cheikh ‘Papa’ Sakho to stay in The Blue House. Sakho sought asylum, having evaded authorities after surviving the fire in the Schiphol migrant detention centre in 2005. At The Blue House, Speck and Sakho organised Migrant to Migrant (M2M) radio, a weekly internet program discussing immigration and related issues broadcast on Friday nights. The M2M broadcast nights included an open invitation to dinner and participation in the evening.

The Frida Project was also conducted by van Heeswijk during 2008 and 2009. Several women, all going under the pseudonym ‘Frida’, were employed as resident hosts of The Blue House. Assuming responsibility for welcoming guests as part of offering hospitality, including cooking for the M2M project, was not always an easy task for the women. Some of the women’s experiences were also documented by other members. The reversal of the normative position of illegal workers made visible the position of undocumented workers in the Dutch economy and the contentious and often fraught nature of hospitality at The Blue House, and in the Netherlands more generally.

Researching the Unplanned

As a social experiment, The Blue House maintained a non-hierarchical organisational structure with a fluid membership supported and led by Jeanne van Heeswijk, and offers a case of ‘autonomous’ social art with unplanned

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46 Some campaigners associated immigration with the government’s sizable pension liability (with many migrants drawing benefits); in 2006, 7.5 million Dutch workers were supporting one million Dutch on disability pensions, see Tim Colebatch, ‘Should going Dutch be the Australian way?’, The Age, 23 March 2004, viewed 2 August 2011, http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/03/22/1079939577920.html?from=storyrhs
47 Several members of The Blue House recalled a newspaper headline in which a private homeowner protested that he did not want to see Moroccans living in the same street. Van Heeswijk interview with the author, 17 June 2011.
48 At The Blue House Sakho was a guest of the European Cultural Foundation (ECF), which placed him beyond local authorities, according to van Heeswijk interview with the author, 17 June 2011. The ECF participation was part of ALMOSTREAL, an ECF project organised by Igor Dobricic, the arts programme officer of the ECF, in exchange for bringing funding to The Blue House.
49 M2M radio is at http://M2M.streamtime.org. M2M also offered a meal to visitors on broadcast evenings.
50 Several women found the role too difficult to undertake for long according to van Heeswijk, in Van Heeswijk interview with the author, 17 June 2011.
51 Research for artist Sonia Boyce comprised documentation of her discussions with the longest serving Frida. Sonia Boyce interview with the author, 12 May 2010.
outcomes. Generating dynamic, creative processes of inquiry, social art research at *The Blue House* falls within Andreas Mueller’s description of Participatory Action Research—‘a method that approaches a given situation through research activities, involving participants and existing local social networks’—without aiming at preconceived results.\(^\text{52}\) The conceptual inquiry of *The Blue House* was differentiated from the ‘social service’ provision of new genre public art, direct political activism or critical aesthetics based in ethics or art interpreted in terms of political models.\(^\text{53}\) *The Blue House* employed fields of interaction to generate relations, idiosyncratic critical perspectives and dialogues on urbanism. The selection of projects conducted under the mantle of *The Blue House* evidences the potential for intersubjective experiences to arise between members and residents through creative processes questioning how to relate to others, and to understand concerns that cross public and private boundaries.

Although outcomes exceeded expectations on the whole, not all projects fulfilled the ambitions of individual members and residents. Some members were disappointed at their inability to generate dialogue and participation, and others disheartened that residents were not able to sustain projects.\(^\text{54}\) Original IJburg residents were critical of the exclusivity of *The Blue House*, and would have preferred priority be given to the house as a social space, in contrast to the increasing level of general public interest that the project generated over time.\(^\text{55}\) The differing opinions between members and residents, as evident in the *Pump Up the Blue*, *Chill-ROOM* and *Frida* projects, highlighted divergent understandings of notions of public and private space, and the accommodation of differing attitudes and responsibilities toward others. Residents acknowledged that *The Blue House* contributed to generating a discursive community, and informed the creation of IJburg’s early history.\(^\text{56}\)

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\(^\text{53}\) Grant Kester criticises social art that aims to offer social good: ‘This puts the artist in the problematic position of being held responsible for rectifying the disempowered status of the disadvantaged instead of insisting on the need for the systematic causes of poverty and other social issues to be alleviated, placing the community artist in the role of a ‘social service provider’;’ in Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, p. 138. Also see Bishop, C. 2006, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents’, *Artforum*, vol. 44, no. 6, pp. 178–84. *The Blue House* was not a form of ‘insurgent cosmopolitanism’, that writers such as Boaventure de Sousa Santos propose is capable of contradicting the determinism of economic globalisation.


\(^\text{56}\) Maarthe van Eerdt interview with the author, 15 June 2011, and Paul O’Neill interview with Marius Knulst, ‘Locating the Producers’ 11 April 2008. The house received larger numbers of general visitors in its later years, according to van Heeswijk, in Van Heeswijk interview with the author, 17 June 2011.
Art historian Hal Foster identified the risk of artists acting as quasi-anthropologists when responding subjectively to communities and cultures. Foster’s criticism was based in a textual interpretation of (non-social) artworks in the mid-1990s, but remains relevant to the unprogrammatic practices of social artists. However, at The Blue House residents were not treated as a generalised other. Members interacted with neighbours in intuitive, if heuristic ways in the creation of interventions into the ‘unplanned’. In addition, the majority of The Blue House members were Dutch or European and were familiar with the cultural nuances of living in Amsterdam. Members also had the assistance of the house manager, and the time to engage with the situation without being pressured to produce outcomes. The Block 35 Housing Association was also a control mechanism, with the residents having power to stop The Blue House projects. Finally, the membership structure, comprising an interdisciplinary mix of outsiders and residents, provided a supportive and critical framework. Aware of the miscellany of sensibilities and beliefs existing in the proximity of Block 35, members sought common points of reference with individual neighbours to activate research projects.

Consequently, I argue, creative and social research and cultural production at The Blue House were brought about through a ‘creative milieu’ generated under the leadership of van Heeswijk. There is no evidence of a communal feeling developing at Block 35, or of more than periodic association between members. Members physically came together at a few events, such as the closing symposium, otherwise only communicating over significant issues. In being responsive to site and individuals at IJburg, I find the uninvited guests of The Blue House membership accorded with Patricia Reed’s concept of being simultaneously host and ‘un-host’. Reed’s concept suggests a consequent blurring of control and agency. The Blue House provided capacity for agency at an individual level. Members and residents at IJburg could find themselves as participants or observers at different moments over the five years of the project. Both residents and members could be seen to participate within their individual

58 Proposals for Pump Up the Blue and the Chill-Room were disputed by residents through the Association, activated only after convincing the Association of their public validity and taking responsibility for any potential private impact. Van Heeswijk interview with the author, 17 June 2011.
59 The idea of milieu, as a set or sets of complex networks ‘of mainly informal social relationships within a specific internal “representation” and a sense of belonging, which enhance the local innovative capability through synergetic and collective learning processes’ is seen as a common point of reference essential for understanding and thus for communication and knowledge transfer (especially tacit knowledge transfer), in Heßler, M. and Zimmermann, C. (eds) 2008, Creative Urban Milieus, Historical Perspectives on Culture, Economy, and the City, Frankfurt/New York, Campus Verlag, pp. 385–6.
60 ‘Throughout the process of un-hosting a degree of control (not all) is dispersed and it is precisely that dispersion of “control” that blurs conventional notions of authorship’ according to Patricia Reed, in D. Goldenberg and P. Reed, 2008, ‘What is a Participatory Practice?’, Fillip, viewed 29 June 2010, http://fillip.ca/content/what-is-a-participatory-practice
creative milieu, one that was based in the contingent investigation of how to be a good neighbour or guest. At best The Blue House generated individual appreciation of the potential of social processes for agency or intersubjective awareness within a larger milieu or personal world. Operating at the level of individuals, I contend social art at The Blue House was differentiated from the concepts of community suggested for social or dialogic art by Grant Kester, or Bourriaud’s utopian model of communicative action in relational aesthetics.

In a seeming contradiction, van Heeswijk’s success in leading independent social art at The Blue House also offered potential administrative outcomes of the sort she aimed to avoid. Many Blue House projects fulfilled the ‘high imagination enabling’ and do-it-yourself attitudes advocated for artists in creative cities, and contributed to generating economic and cultural capital. In organising The Blue House, van Heeswijk epitomised the entrepreneurial abilities appreciated by urban policy and commerce for responsiveness to local and global markets, namely: being autonomous, able to generate income, demonstrating excellent negotiation skills, and acting as an inspiring manager who could mentor others.

In addition, Igor Roovers, Director of Projectburo IJburg, indicated interest in instrumentally applying his learning from The Blue House in more organic neighbourhood development and responsive city planning in the future. Roovers had remained engaged across the duration of The Blue House after van Heeswijk refused his initial offer to fund the project. Although ultimately disinterested in the project as art, Roovers concluded The Blue House created a civic space, and maintained a similar project operating during Phase II of IJburg construction would likewise benefit the city.

Roovers’ response indicated that despite delivering pragmatic outcomes and indicating the intersubjective potential of social art, The Blue House evidenced the risk of social art projects being diverted into value for commercial urban developers or implicated in social policy, in contrast to the ideal political function of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. The Blue House attracted community interest and improved the quality of life at no cost to the Projectburo. By default, The Blue House also delivered the Dutch national cultural policy objective of fostering the participation of young people and immigrants in cultural expression on IJburg.

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61 Relevant Blue House projects in this regard included a website to connect local business people, and Koek’s Flowers for IJburg which generated economic income or replaced market exchanges.

62 Roovers interview with the author, 21 May 2010.


64 Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Cultural Policy in the Netherlands, 12. The Blue House was also appropriated in real estate sales promotions.
Conclusion

Fostering creativity with the potential to generate social and cultural worlds, *The Blue House* encouraged interpersonal or cosmopolitan imagination, and communicative interaction and networks connecting members and residents at IJburg. The project also mobilised a dispersed international and travelling membership, with linkages across the milieu resembling the concept of Nikos Papastergiadis’ ‘spatial aesthetics’. Dispersed members employed digital networks to share information and promote relations, document research and maintain contacts. In the thinking of van Heeswijk, members transferring *The Blue House* research to other sites and times became ‘Blue Points’. Two ‘Blue Points’ have subsequently been established in Amsterdam, one artist basing his social practice in a city shopping mall, and another operating from a domestic space. Members have also co-created projects addressing local urban concerns in Hong Kong and Latin America.

In their dynamic creative connections, the ‘Blue Points’ resemble the ‘nodes’ that Arjun Appadurai refers to as connecting points within ‘a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes’. *The Blue House* members entered into the transnational hegemony of global neoliberalism through local actions. In requiring individuals to think about how to make connections to others and their singular worlds in uneven economic, social and cultural conditions, *The Blue House* may be useful in rethinking global communities in ways similarly appreciated by Nancy Fraser. Fraser proposes the ongoing critical relevance of a transnational public sphere based in a critical problematising of normative models for democratic and emancipatory politics. Overall, the individual actions and communications of *The Blue House* generated potential political agency and creative social resources in responding locally to the world-making of global society. The dispersed and mobile members continue the potential for the ongoing galvanising of individual learning and reach of relations from IJburg. In this sense, *The Blue House* project offers an example of how artists ‘reshape the human capacity to make worlds on small, local scales’ while bolstering hope that contemporary art is ‘becoming art of the world’.

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66 Organised with Hong Kong member and curator Howard Chan, and the Argentinian collective M7red.
68 Processes of economic globalisation, defined as the transnational spread or hegemony of neoliberalism at the expense of state boundaries and social interests, according to Santos, ‘Globalisations’, pp. 393–4.
69 Fraser proposes a transnational public sphere requires new forms of political accountability to publics embracing greater inclusiveness or a parity of participation. See Nancy Fraser, 2007, ‘Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficiency of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 7–30.
70 I extend thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this article for their comments on the power of the social in world making in art.
In an essay titled ‘Poetry and Painting’ Simon Leys discusses the Chinese scholarly art of brush-and-ink painting, a practice in which calligraphic mark making, the careful balancing of ink brush strokes and areas of void, or darkness and light, is understood as an act that resonates with the dynamism of cosmic creation. A painting, and in particular a landscape painting, is said to represent a microcosm of the universe. Leys refers to China as ‘an organic entity’ in which every element can be understood only in relation to others and identifies harmony as the key concept of Chinese civilisation. He elaborates: ‘China is a world…. More exactly, one should say that China is a certain world view, a way of conceiving the relations between man and the universe—a recipe for the cosmic order’. Learning about Chinese civilisation, he says, requires a ‘global intuition’.

While Leys’ writing is directed at what we might think of as traditional Chinese aesthetics and a traditional Chinese world view, the idea of China as a world, or representing a certain world view, retains some validity today. This is particularly the case in relation to the difficulty of comprehending the complexity of contemporary Chinese society with its historic overlays of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Republicanism, Communism and state capitalism. Today Chinese artists live and work in a globalised world of a kind that was impossible to imagine 30 years ago, a unique mix of Communist control and free-wheeling economics. Chinese experimental art reflects world trends. Many artists use photography and video, media that directly reference and at the same time question reality, to give expression to ideas and emotions, and mediate the world that they inhabit.

During a series of interviews with Shanghai-based artist Yang Fudong (b. 1971), conducted in 2010-11 for the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation exhibition ‘No Snow on the Broken Bridge’, Yang Fudong posed the questions ‘What is reality?’, and ‘What is the reality in your mind?’. His questions point to the significance of perspective in creative practice and a dichotomy between state or collective and individual perceptions of what constitutes reality. In the course of the interviews Yang Fudong repeatedly used words like ‘beauty’ (mei; meihao; meide ganjue), and ‘sensation’ or ‘feeling’ (ganjue). Of particular interest was the way he described his practice in relation to China and the world. Yang used the metaphor of the ocean, made up of water, which he described as a medium that moves around, and cannot be fixed or precisely identified as belonging to one place or another, while also pointing out the paradox of operating in an expansive globalised world, and yet living and working in a relatively small, circumscribed and culturally familiar environment.

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3 Since 2005 the concept of harmony (hexie), a universalist philosophical idea central to Confucian and Daoist conceptions of the world, has been employed in the slogan ‘harmonious society’ (hexie shehui) and been used as a narrative device to assist the Chinese Communist Party maintain social stability and enhance its image and strategic direction. Related to China’s rise as the world’s second largest economy, is the Chinese government’s ongoing efforts (launched at the Beijing Olympics) to present its own narrative of Chinese history to its citizens and the world, ‘The China Story’. Endeavours such as The Australian Centre on China in the World’s China Story yearbooks, are part of an ongoing effort by scholars working outside China to understand and interpret the ‘China Story’, from official and non-official perspectives. See ‘Building harmonious society crucial for China’s progress: Hu’. http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200506/27/eng20050627_192495.html (viewed 11 January 2013); and Barmé, G. R. 2012, Red Rising, Red Eclipse, Australian Centre on China on the World, The Australian National University, http://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2012/cover-and-introduction/ (viewed 11 January 2013).


5 An interview with Yang Fudong was conducted in Shanghai on 28 November 2010 with a follow-up phone interview on 14 January 2011.

Like many of his contemporaries Yang Fudong regards himself as an artist rather than a Chinese artist. He has ready access to information about contemporary art from around the world and chooses to live and work in China rather than sojourn abroad as was the case with an earlier generation. China is his reality. The artistic language of photography and video allows him to construct worlds that appear real but are the product of his mind, connecting him with cosmopolitan ideas: ‘...you respect and trust the moment in which you live and what you have. And you continue working according to your own thoughts and beliefs’. ‘If you want to move forward’, he said, ‘you need to be someone who is of the world...you need to maintain an interested state of mind. Talking with friends, it seems that these past few years we have given more thought to the concept of tolerance (kuanrong) ...By this I mean tolerance in relation to people, art and life’.

Yang Fudong went on to say:

The idea of tolerance also relates to feelings. Some of us have interpreted this as maintaining belief in the ultimate importance of knowledge. There are so many things that one does not understand. You cannot say that, just because you don’t understand something, it is no good or uninteresting. Rather, it is that you don’t yet have the knowledge ...We are often functioning in a state of ignorance...In this context, tolerance includes an element of self-awareness.  

In discussing the creative world of Yang Fudong consideration will be given to the notion of artistic reality, and the significance of the phrase kuanrong. In English ‘tolerance’ means the disposition to be patient with or indulgent to the opinions or practices of others; freedom from bigotry or undue severity in judging the conduct of others; forbearance. The Chinese word kuanrong literally means ‘broad-faced’ or to be ‘broad and accepting’ and is imbued with particular cultural and political resonances.

The way that in recent years the concept of tolerance (kuanrong) has figured in the consciousness of Yang Fudong and his friends is a result, in part, of their knowledge of world affairs gleaned from international travel and the internet. It may also relate to discussions within China of the need to create a civil society and resignation to the fact that institutional and structural change may not happen any time soon. The Chinese word for tolerance, kuanrong, is complex. It means forbearance, but can also suggest leniency or magnanimity, to forgive, to pardon, to excuse.

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7 Claire Roberts interview with Yang Fudong, 28 November 2010.
8 With thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments which helped shape the final version of this essay.
The concept of tolerance appears in early Confucian and Buddhist texts. For the generation of artists born a few decades earlier than Yang Fudong the word *kuanrong* is associated with Hu Yaobang’s (1915-1989) leadership as General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1982 to 1987. It was used by Zhu Houze (1931-2010) Minister of the Central Propaganda Department, who in 1986 proposed the ‘Three *kuan* Policy’ of tolerance (*kuanrong*), leniency (*kuansong*) and generosity (*kuanhou*).9

During his time as General Secretary Hu Yaobang supported economic and political reform but was removed from office in a power struggle in 1987 owing to his laxness in stemming ‘bourgeois liberalisation’ or Western democratic influence following student demonstrations that erupted across the country. In the related campaign to counter the ‘Three *kuan* Policy’, Zhu Houze was demoted from the post of propaganda chief. Hu Yaobang’s death a few years later in April 1989 prompted commemorative demonstrations in Tian’anmen Square, which lead to mass protests and the massacre of June 4. Yang Fudong was 18 at the time.

Responding to the hope and turmoil of the period one artist, Shen Jiawei (b. 1948), a graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (1984), created an oil painting that he titled ‘Tolerance’ (*Kuanrong*).10 The painting was completed in November 1988, shortly before he left China to study in Australia. Shen Jiawei’s revolutionary history paintings were highly regarded (his 1974 work ‘Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland’ was praised by Jiang Qing) and had been collected by the Museum of the Chinese Revolution and the National History Museum (now the National Museum of China) and the National Art Museum of China in Beijing.

Shen Jiawei is an avid reader and during the mid-1980s he procured a translation of Hendrik Willem van Loon’s book *Tolerance* published in 1925.11 The book was translated into Chinese and published in 1936 as *Kuanrong* by Shanghai’s Commercial Press. Like many foreign language works that were first introduced to China in the 1920s and 1930s, it was banned after 1949, and then rediscovered in the mid-1980s by a new generation of intellectuals. Van Loon’s clearly articulated concepts of humanism and tolerance (religious, racial and social) outlined through parables drawn from Western intellectual history had a profound impact on Shen Jiawei.

10 Shen Jiawei, n.d., ‘Hua li hua wai’ (Paintings: Stories Within and Beyond), unpublished manuscript. I am grateful to Shen Jiawei for providing me with a copy of this text.
Van Loon begins *Tolerance* in a storybook style: ‘Happily lived Mankind in the peaceful Valley of Ignorance...’ Passages that would have resonated with Shen Jiawei and Chinese youth in the late 1980s include: “The struggle for tolerance is part of the age-old conflict between “organised society” which places the continued safety of the “group” ahead of all other considerations and those private citizens of unusual intelligence or energy who hold that such improvement as the world has thus far experienced was invariably due to the efforts of the individual and not due to the efforts of the mass (which by its very nature is distrustful of all innovations) and that therefore the rights of the individual are far more important than those of the mass.” Ideas such as these confirmed the actions of students demonstrating on university campuses and in Tian’anmen Square, calling on the Chinese government for political reform and human rights for individuals.

In the final chapter, ‘The Last Hundred Years’, Van Loon concludes on an optimistic note: ‘History, chary of revealing her secrets, has thus far taught us one great lesson. What the hand of man has done, the hand of man can also undo. It is a question of courage, and next to courage, of education.’

In painting ‘Tolerance’ Shen Jiawei intended to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the New Culture Movement and the May 4th student demonstrations of 1919. Rather than focus on the usual themes of anti-imperialism and the awakening of interest in Marxism and Leninism, aroused by patriotic students protesting before Tian’anmen Gate following China’s treatment at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Shen Jiawei chose to portray leading intellectuals at Peking University associated with the New Culture Movement, individuals who promoted science, democracy and liberal values. In choosing this subject he was making a conscious link to the intellectual activities of the late 1980s, widely regarded as a continuation of the spirit of the New Culture movement.

The central figure in Shen’s composition is Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), who had studied in Germany and was President of Peking University, and former Minister of Education. Cai is surrounded by the professors and teachers he invited to teach at the University, including Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, who went on to found the Chinese Communist Party, the scientist and amateur photographer Liu Bannong, and the acclaimed writer and social critic Lu Xun. Most of the figures carry an attribute, many of them publications and texts that aid their identification. Lu Xun for example holds up the logo he designed for Peking University, which remains in use today. The two stylised archaic Chinese

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12 van Loon, p. 275.
13 Ibid., p. 395.
14 Shen Jiawei, ‘Hua li hua wai’.
15 Other scholars represented in the painting include Hu Shi, Huang Kan, Liang Shuming, Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Liu Shipei, Qian Xuantong, Liu Bannong, Zhou Zuoren, Ma Shulun, Shen Yinmo.
characters ‘Bei da’, literally ‘Northern Great’, an abbreviation of Peking Great Learning or Peking University, form a globe-like whole, at once traditional and modern.

The virtuosic generational portrait, which in its idealism and dream-like detachment has unexpected affinities with the work of Yang Fudong, as we shall see, was intended for the Seventh National Art Exhibition scheduled for June 1989. Shen Jiawei had been granted a visa to study English and left China in late 1988 the day before his visa was due to expire. The selection process for the exhibition occurred when he was in Australia. He was told by officials that the painting had not been submitted because it was larger than the specified dimensions. Two years later, the work was acquired by the National Museum of the Chinese Revolution (recommended by a friend) to fill a gap in an exhibition about the New Culture Movement of 1919. In the process of becoming an official exhibit, the title of the painting was changed from ‘Tolerance’ to ‘The Sounding of the Bell at Peking University’, attesting to ongoing sensitivity of the word tolerance. Located on the eastern flank of Tian’anmen Square, close to where students have historically gathered to protest, officials at the National Museum of China were careful to distance themselves from the word ‘tolerance’ and avoid any suggestion of forgiveness or pardon that the word might imply.

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Yang Fudong was born in 1971, a generation later than Shen Jiawei, and five years before the death of Mao Zedong (1893-1976) which precipitated the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. A painted portrait of Mao Zedong has continued Mao’s watch over China, hanging below the rostrum of the Gate of Heavenly Peace at Tian’anmen Square where in 1949 he proclaimed the founding of the People’s Republic of China, which became known as ‘new China’. The Gate marks the entrance to the Forbidden City, former home of Chinese emperors, and epicentre of the Chinese imperial world. A closely framed portrait photograph of Yang Fudong originally included in the ‘personal photo album’ section of his website shows Yang standing on the edge of Tian’anmen Square, the wind blowing his fashionably long hair across his face, with the painting of Mao Zedong hovering in the background. Yang faces the camera and the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong, which was strategically placed on the imperial axis in Tian’anmen Square. The choice of a site that is so charged with socio-political significance suggests irony as well as an historical awareness that locates Yang Fudong in a specific temporal context.

Yang Fudong’s family comes from Xiang He (Fragrant River), a farming village about two hours by car southeast of Beijing. He grew up in a military compound

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16 Shen Jiawei, ‘Hua li hua wai’. 

to the east of Beijing—an army garrison the purpose of which was to defend Beijing.\(^{17}\) His father was a soldier and Yang describes his life growing up in the garrison as happy, safe and free. The community was self-sufficient. It was, he said, ‘a world of its own’.\(^{18}\)

Yang Fudong moved from the world of the military compound to the world of the middle school of the elite Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. He lived on campus in an enclave-like environment, a different version of the privileged, self-contained world that he had known as an army child.

After graduating from the middle school of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1991 Yang Fudong moved to Hangzhou and continued his studies at the China Art Academy (previously Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art). In the years since Yang Fudong’s graduation from the Oil Painting Department in 1995, the Chinese art world has developed in ways that were hard to foresee.

The art academy in Hangzhou was at the forefront of the expansion of artistic practice from ink painting, oil painting, printmaking and sculpture to installation and conceptual art, performance, photography, video and new media. Zhang Peili (b. 1957), regarded as the ‘father’ of video art in China, graduated from the oil painting department in 1984. In 1988 he produced a video work 30x30 which records the smashing of a mirror and attempts to reassemble it with gloved hands, a process that is repeated for 32 minutes. The futility of re-assembling shattered mirror glass and reflected reality gave the work an obscure critical edge.\(^{19}\)

The dramatic expansion of contemporary art practice was mirrored in the proliferation of art magazines across the country and semantic shifts in magazine titles. The word *meishu*, which may be translated as fine art, increasingly gave way to *yishu*, a word that is more inclusive of a diversity of arts and contemporary practices.

Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s the Chinese art world was dominated by the magazines *Art* (*Meishu*), *Chinese Art* (*Zhongguo meishu*) and *World Art* (*Shijie meishu*) which effectively separated the Chinese world from the ‘other’. As with all publications produced in China they were strictly controlled. *Art* was first published in 1954 and grew out of *People’s Art* (*Renmin meishu* established in 1950). It is the official magazine of the Chinese Artists’ Association, a national body for artists administered by the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (publication was suspended

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17 His father belonged to an infantry unit, the Beijing Number 12 and Number 13 Public Security Regiment.
18 Claire Roberts interview with Yang Fudong, 14 January 2011.
19 In 2002 Zhang Peili was appointed to the China Art Academy to establish a new media department, which opened the following year, the first of its kind in China.
during the Cultural Revolution and resumed in 1976). Chinese Art, produced by the Chinese Artists’ Association, and World Art published by the Central Academy of Fine Arts, both appeared in 1979. World Art introduced Chinese readers to art from around the globe and was part of the project of economic liberalisation occasioned by Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Open door policy’ after the end of the Cultural Revolution. The introduction to the inaugural issue of World Art begins: ‘According to the historical experience of cultural development, a confident people should not isolate themselves from the world. In the realms of politics, economics and culture, every nation should offer their own experience to other peoples and in so doing contribute to humankind, while at the same time studying the strengths of others in order to make up for ones own deficiencies with the aim of self-strengthening’.20 By ‘opening the door’ China hoped to share its cultural riches with the world and get something in return, but it was clear that that something would be what the State deemed appropriate for economic development and adapted to suit China’s own ends.

By the 1990s, when Yang Fudong was studying at the art academy in Hangzhou, the focus of interest had shifted from ‘world art’ to the ‘art world’ and contemporary global practice. The first Chinese magazine devoted to art as a commodity was Art and Market (Yishu shichang) published in 1991, edited by Sun Ping, Lü Peng and Zheng Shengtian (a graduate of the Hangzhou art academy and former head of the oil painting department, then based in America), and published by the Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House with the assistance of the International Institute for the Arts, USA. Information about the international commercial art world was obtained from Zheng Shengtian and a network of Chinese artists who had left China in the mid-1980s or who sought refuge overseas after the student demonstrations and massacre of 4 June 1989. The early issues of Art & Market include reviews of overseas exhibitions and art fairs, essays on international art dealers, guidance on collecting and investing in contemporary art, legal advice on selling works of art, and a listing of commercial galleries in New York. For artists like Yang Fudong, who were studying in art academies and contemplating life after graduation, magazines like Art & Market broadened their horizons and connected them to the international art world.

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Yang Fudong’s reputation as an artist with a highly refined and oblique artistic sensibility began when he was at art school. In 1993, his third year at the academy, he stopped speaking for three months and would only communicate by writing. The performance work Otherwhere: Not Speaking for Three Months was documented in photographs and video. It turned out to be a turning point in his practice. By limiting communication with the outside world he

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came to the realisation ‘that it was important to have some kind of belief, some spiritual dimension to life’ central to which was belief in himself as a creative practitioner.\footnote{21} Yang’s departure from oil painting was inspired by wide reading (including translations such as Jack Kerouac’s \textit{On The Road}), looking at films (such as videos of performances by Joseph Beuys)\footnote{22} and the example of artist-teachers and mentors including Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969) and Zhang Peili who had abandoned practice in conventional fine arts (in Qiu’s case printmaking) to experiment with video, photography and multi-media arts.

A discussion of selected photographic and video works by Yang Fudong will focus on the evolution of Yang Fudong’s artistic language and his resistance to conventional narrative structure. In a set of three photographs given the English title ‘Don’t worry, It will be better…’ (2000) Yang Fudong takes the viewer into a high-rise hotel room or apartment in Shanghai. The setting is intimate but the subjects of the work (five young urbanites, four men and one woman) appear distant from one another despite their close physical proximity. While the images are like stills from a movie set their sequencing does not help to construct a plausible narrative. In the second image all five people gaze out the window of the skyscraper as if looking for an answer. Slogan-like captions in English in white on red - ‘Don’t worry, It will be better…’ – are added to the upper right or lower left of the images recalling Communist didactic texts used to reinforce political dogma. But in this case the combination of image and text adds to our sense of bewilderment. We are not sure what is happening, and what ‘It’ is that will be better.\footnote{23}

Yang uses a similar visual dynamic (incongruous pairing of image and English text) in another series of three photographs titled \textit{The First Intellectual} (2000). A smartly-dressed young man who has been injured is pictured outdoors with the Pudong skyline (Shanghai’s new finance and commerce hub) in the background. (At the time Yang Fudong was working in Shanghai for UBI, a French video game developer.) As with the previous work the drama that appears to have caused a brick to fall from the sky is beyond the picture frame. By removing the cause of the incident the viewer is left hanging, unable to make sense of the images or draw specific conclusions.

\footnote{21} Claire Roberts interview with Yang Fudong, 28 November 2010.\footnote{22} Nesbit, M. 2011, ‘Wild Shanghai Grass’ in \textit{The Distance of Reality: Solo Exhibition of Yang Fudong}, exh. cat., Havana, Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Center, pp. 115–6.\footnote{23} For images of this and other works that are not illustrated see \url{http://www.yangfudong.com/} (viewed 24 February 2013).
Yang Fudong’s most ambitious project to date and the work that brought him to international attention is *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest*, a five part series of black and white films that together run for some five hours that were made over five years from 2003 to 2007. As with previous works Yang’s subject is a cohort of young people that he refers to as intellectuals.

The work was in part inspired by ‘The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove’ a group of Chinese scholars and poets of the third century who fled the chaotic and corrupt world of government service during the Three Kingdoms period (220-265) and retreated to a bamboo grove where they engaged in Daoist-inspired pure thought and discussion, appreciating the beauties of nature and forgetting about worldly troubles. The ‘Seven Sages’ who turn their back on the official world to cultivate inner virtue have long served as a model for writers and thinkers living in troubled times.

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24 Yang Fudong: *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest*, 2008, exhib. cat. Stockholm, Jarla Partilager. The first instalment of the five-part work was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2003 and the entire cycle was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2007.
Yang Fudong’s series opens with the seven ‘young intellectuals’ in the mountainous landscape of Huangshan or Yellow Mountain, described by Yang as ‘A postcard-like set of travel notes on the good life’. Part Two locates the group in ‘a flourishing city’. Part Three finds them in the countryside where they plough by day and rest by night ‘forgetting all that bothers them’. In Part Four they are on an island described by Yang as ‘a tiny island of belief’ that might be utopia; and in Part Five they ‘return to the city, devoid of identity’, still a collective of youth, but their future uncertain. Yang’s brief descriptions, like the films, suggest a quest for utopia that is ultimately not realised.

The five parts, screened simultaneously, explore ideas related to history and memory, myth and reality. They use visual and sensory means to give form to things that have no form and are difficult to express. While Chinese history as well as natural, regional and urban landscapes form backdrops to the films, narrative disjunction and a haunting visual beauty cause viewers to lose their bearings in time and space.

Under Mao Zedong Chinese society was turned on its head. In the project to create a socialist utopia the former ruling class, largely made up of intellectuals and considered politically suspect were purged and less educated classes - workers, peasants and soldiers - rose to prominence. The parallels between ‘Seven Intellectuals’, ‘Seven Sages’ and the experiences of rusticated youths, urban intellectuals who during the Cultural Revolution were sent to the countryside to learn from illiterate farmers, suggest an allusive commentary on the plight of independent-minded intellectuals and the extreme experiences to which young people were subjected in the recent past. Here, the incongruity of earlier English language titles previously noted is replaced by a ‘Chinglish’ rendition of the generally accepted English translation of Zhu lin qi xian (The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove), the Chinese title of the work highlighting the agency of the artist.

In No Snow on the Broken Bridge (2006) Yang Fudong continues to reflect on word play and the lives and minds of a group of young people. Like his earlier film An Estranged Paradise (2002), it was filmed in Hangzhou, an ancient capital famous for the West Lake, and historically regarded as ‘Paradise on Earth’. It was where Yang Fudong went to art school, a place that he ‘loved’. ‘It was,’ he said,’where I grew up’. 

25 Ibid., 222.
26 Zhu lin qi xian is sometimes translated as ‘The Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Forest.’
27 Claire Roberts interview with Yang Fudong, 28 November 2010.
The title of Yang’s work *No Snow on the Broken Bridge* refers to the phrase ‘Lingering Snow on the Broken Bridge’ (*Duan qiao can xue*) one of the acknowledged ‘Ten Famous Views of the West Lake’. The historic Duan Family Bridge is located on the eastern end of the Bai Causeway at the West Lake in Hangzhou. Duan is a surname, but a different Chinese character with the same pronunciation means ‘broken’. While the bridge is thought to date from prior to the seventh century, the poetic scene that it evokes dates from the time Hangzhou was the capital of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279). The snow-clad landscape and dark lake evoke the beauty of crystal and jade, or a brush-and-ink painting. A tourist plaque erected at the site describes the scene: ‘Standing on top of Baoshi Hill, one can have a bird’s eye view of the beautiful scenery to the south: Bai Causeway lying beneath a blanket of snow looks like a long silver chain across the lake, which seems to break up abruptly when it reaches the end of the causeway, where the dark surface of the bridge emerges from the melting snow, evoking the magical scene of the ‘bridge breaking as the snow melts’. The phrase *canxue*, or ‘lingering snow’, may also be translated as ‘the dirty snow that refuses to melt’, implying a relentless kind of melancholy. The site is also associated with the ‘Legend of the White Snake’, a popular
Tolerance: The World of Yang Fudong

A folktale about a white snake that took the form of a beautiful girl who falls tragically in love with a young man. Yang Fudong mines the poetic richness of the subject, allowing viewers to bring a range of associations to his work.

Men wearing long robes and women wearing cheong sam (qipao) promenade and linger in pairs or foursomes, exploring the environment and their inner selves. They are travellers who come with expectations, but it is hard to predict what their futures might hold. A mountain goat is led on a leash, and a cockatoo is tethered to a carrying frame, suggesting the subservience of animals and birds to humans who desire to treat them as objects of curiosity or aesthetic pleasure.


Courtesy of Artist Yang Fudong and ShanghART Gallery

Yang Fudong’s imagery evokes the feeling of snowfall that remains after it has stopped snowing, which he describes as being the ‘like the beauty of an ice maiden.’ The feeling is he says ‘very beautiful, but it is imbued with an air of tragedy’. Visually seductive images are projected onto eight large screens immersing the viewer in a familiar yet unfamiliar world of Yang Fudong’s making; of interconnected narratives without beginning or end. The viewer is invited to engage freely with the films (there is no expectation that the films are

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28 Claire Roberts interview with Yang Fudong, 14 January 2011.
29 Claire Roberts interview with Yang Fudong, 28 November 2010.
seen in sequence or from start to finish) and by viewing imagery on different screens create their own free-form film (ziyou dianying). Like other works that have been discussed, the structure and artistic language of ‘No Snow’ prevents any single or simple interpretation. The work is open and opaque, defiant in its inability to fix meaning.

Yang Fudong’s photographs and films are about moods and emotions, escape and entrapment, truth and deception. The language is cool and yet he seeks to plumb emotional depths, drawing strength from deeply felt aspects of life and culture. Yang Fudong is not overwhelmed by China’s visual past, seeing it as a complex language that continues to evolve, and to which he is connected. He begins *An Estranged Paradise* with a lesson on Chinese brush-and-ink painting. The hand of an artist creates a landscape painting and a narrator explains (with English subtitles): ‘Poetic mood is the life of painting...But how can poetic mood be achieved?....’

Yang Fudong admires the modern brush-and-ink painter Fu Baoshi (1905-1965), a cosmopolitan artist-intellectual (he studied in Japan in the early 1930s and was part of an official delegation of artists that travelled to Czechoslovakia and Romania in 1957) who lived during a turbulent period of war and revolution: ‘He is a great contemporary figure painter. He did something different. With his figures painted in an antique mode he moved things forward a lot. He is a bit like a modern Liang Kai (active first half of the 13th century) who painted figures using a splashed ink technique. His paintings are beautiful, including his landscapes.... He is like a hot-blooded youth. His paintings give you a feeling of the extraordinary.’

Fu Baoshi’s paintings of historic and mythic beauties—the Goddess of the Xiang River, mountain spirits, or of beautiful women inspired by the paintings of Gu Kaizhi (ca. 345-406), with their clear, flowing lines and depiction of atmospherics (branches of pine and willow trees blown by the wind; swirling autumnal leaves) and harmonious brush-and-ink technique (fine calligraphic lines; moody ink wash; delicate colours) are imbued with a poignant beauty, a poetic mood that resonates with the aesthetic sensibility found in *No Snow on the Broken Bridge*.32

Fu Baoshi painted several versions of *Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove* between 1943-45, the Sino-Japanese war period. In each case the figures occupy their own space as they drink wine, play the zither, view paintings and commune with nature, highlighting their significance as individual men of conscience.

30 Liang Kai is a Southern Song (1127–1279) artist who lived and worked near Hangzhou, renowned for his spontaneous, abbreviated painting style.
31 Claire Roberts interview with Yang Fudong, 28 November 2010.
32 Chung, A. 2012, *Chinese Art in an Age of Revolution: Fu Baoshi (1904–1965),* exhib, cat., New Haven, Yale University Press, pp. 20, 105, 183. The Goddess or Lady of the Xiang River is a subject in the *Nine Songs (Jiuge)*, poems that are traditionally attributed to Qu Yuan (343–278 BCE).
In painting this subject Fu Baoshi was perhaps alluding to gatherings of like-minded friends who sought solace in one another’s company in Chongqing, the wartime capital of the Republic of China during the Sino-Japanese war. As in the painting by Fu Baoshi, Yang Fudong’s *Seven Intellectuals* also occupy a common pictorial space and yet are remote from one another, suggesting a similar interest in the idea of retreat from worldly trouble.

After finishing *Seven Intellectuals* there was a change in Yang Fudong’s artistic style. Works such as *East of Que Village* (2007) and *Blue Kylin* (2008) depict places and the activities of people and animals that are real. Acknowledging the shift to a straighter documentary-like style Yang observed: ‘I could no longer make films with that Utopian feeling, or with what some have described as a formalist style’.

Filmed in a village close to where his grandparents lived and not far from where he grew up, *East of Que Village* reflects Yang’s desire ‘to capture a feeling of the north’ associated with his youth: a feeling of extreme cold, dry atmosphere and bare trees. Dogs feature prominently in the film. ‘They look like wild dogs,’ he

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34 Claire Roberts interview with Yang Fudong, 28 November 2010.
says, ‘and yet they cannot leave the village…They depend on people to eke out life…When I was growing up, these dogs left a deep impression on me. They were aggressive and scary but they were also prone to dying in winter.’

In China, as elsewhere, truth is often stranger than fiction. Yang Fudong is one of many photographers and filmmakers who have focused their lens on the real world and presented it as art. The documentary turn, which began in the late 1980s, has been a powerful trend enabling experimental artists to give expression to humanitarian ideals. For Yang Fudong it is perhaps a way of returning to first principles, using his own eyes, mind and visual poetry to record something of the complex and contradictory world of contemporary China, a world in which it is still possible to discover haunting beauty and chilling terror.

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When the National Museum of China re-opened to the public in its refurbished and expanded form in 2011, Shen Jiawei’s painting ‘Tolerance’ was included in the permanent exhibition ‘The Road of Rejuvenation’ (Fuxing zhì lù), a major display chronicling the story of China’s rise from the humiliation of the Opium Wars of the 1840s to the present. The painting hangs in a section of the exhibition devoted to the New Culture Movement, displayed with a bilingual label and the titles ‘Jian rong bing bao’ and ‘Inclusiveness’ rather than Shen Jiawei’s original title ‘Tolerance’ (Kuanrong). Jian rong bing bao is an historical phrase used by Cai Yuanpei to describe his approach to building a new educational culture at Peking University. The phrase means to unite or come together in an acceptance of inclusiveness and has come to be associated with Cai Yuanpei and his philosophy of bringing together academics from different spheres in the interests of creating a research culture at the university. In an essay published in 1937 Cai Yuanpei observed: ‘following freedom of thinking (sixiang ziyou) leads to inclusivity (jian rong bing bao)’. The phrase ‘Jian rong bing bao’ (without the reference to free thought) was deemed more acceptable than kuanrong which is associated with 1980s liberalisation and has a broader connotation in relation to human behaviour.

[35 Claire Roberts interview with Yang Fudong, 14 January 2011.

Courtesy of Artist Yang Fudong and ShanghART Gallery
The National Museum of China with close to 200,000 square metres of exhibition space claims to be the ‘largest museum in the world with first class facilities and capabilities’. It has a focus on history and art and a growing interest in international exchange and loan exhibitions. Soon after re-opening in 2011 the museum staged *Louis Vuitton: Voyages*, an historical survey of the luxury brand of suitcases and bags celebrating the art of travel. Louis Vuitton has stores in more than 29 Chinese cities from Beijing to Urumqi, and in 2012 celebrated 20 years of doing business there. Using hot air balloons as a display device, exhibition designers sought to focus on the history and romance of global travel. The exhibition attracted considerable controversy, with visitors and museum professionals questioning the decision by the national museum to showcase commercial products through an historicised narrative (the company was established in 1854). This and other exhibitions are striking examples of the kind of commercially driven projects that have been staged in China’s new first class state facilities, underlining the dramatic changes that have occurred in Chinese society over the past 30 years.

An installation by contemporary Chinese artist Zhan Wang provided a dramatic introduction to the Louis Vuitton exhibition, further highlighting the increasingly blurred boundaries between art, business and state-funded cultural enterprise. ‘My Universe: The Beginning’, a personalised meditation on the ‘Big Bang’, involved six high definition video projections of the detonation of a huge boulder, and the installation of fragments of the exploded boulder recreated in Zhan Wang’s signature stainless steel which were suspended on fine wires in the gallery space. The artist’s ambition in attempting to recreate the birth of the universe resonated with the sensory experience of visiting the National Museum of China, its vast entry hall and gallery spaces emphatically defying human scale.

Like Zhan Wang, Yang Fudong is not averse to lending his image to a luxury brand. In 2010 he was invited by Prada to direct a short film to launch its Spring/Summer menswear collection. Prada, like Louis Vuitton, has an important market in China and Yang Fudong’s film was presumably intended to attract a new image-conscious art-savvy clientele. Shot in a film lot against a backdrop of faux ‘old Shanghai’ buildings and trolley buses, Prada-clad men combine with Chinese models in ancient dress to create what has been described as a ‘timeless,
dreamlike realm where anything is possible.’

Titled *First Spring*, alluding to earlier works associated with young intellectuals and the flowering of youth (though not in any way comparable, and unconvincing as a work), the video contains scenes of fashionably dressed men walking on wires above the city with their security apparatus and means of production visible. For Yang Fudong this is a conscious device that highlights ‘the real and the reality of the film’. ‘All the false impressions’ he says ‘are meant to happen in the film studio’. In an interview with Li Zhenhua in 2010, Yang Fudong recalls an early experience working as deputy art director on a film shoot that involved a Western church that had been converted into a primary school (as was the case in the Republican and later periods). Within the church he re-created classrooms from different periods so that the shooting could happen quickly. One day a strong beam of sunlight projected through the clouds after heavy rain illuminating a wall of the classroom and brought the set to life. ‘It was so fake’ he said, but felt ‘so real!’

In contemporary China it is increasingly difficult to distinguish what is real and what is fake or ‘new antique’. In the case of *First Spring*, where Yang Fudong’s ongoing play with questions of reality is directed towards purely commercial ends, we might well ask Yang Fudong ‘What is the reality in your mind?’ Here Yang Fudong’s artistic activity and definition of tolerance extends to lending his name to a luxury global brand. In China the international art market has an increasingly powerful reach and the allure of working with large budgets and luxury brands that cater to a broader global audience is difficult for some artists to resist. The exposure and social prestige that Yang Fudong may have gained through *First Spring* must however be set against the diminution of his image as an independent artist, a status that in China is hard won. With the blurring of boundaries in China’s Communist controlled, state capitalist economy in which international luxury brands flourish, the world of Yang Fudong is very different from the world of Shen Jiawei. Shen Jiawei enthusiastically painted propaganda art during the Cultural Revolution and created the painting ‘Tolerance’ as a way of forging his own version of history painting, a style that might be described as critical realism. Shen Jiawei is of an older generation and one for whom the word ‘tolerance’ has a specific meaning that is closely tied to the social-politics of the late 1980s. Yang Fudong’s understanding of the word is more nuanced and not tied to a particular historical moment, reflecting perhaps the uncertainty and cultural flux that characterises contemporary Chinese society as a whole.

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43 Li Zhenhua, ‘Do Human Beings have Spiritual Life?,’ p. 165.
44 Ibid., pp. 165, 177–8.