

CONTEMPORARY ART CURATORS

TALK ABOUT THEIR WORK

There are 57 artists from 21 countries participating in the 2002 Biennale exhibition.

Richard Grayson is the Artistic Director/Curator of the Biennale of Sydney 2002. Grayson is using the concept brief (*The World May Be Fantastic*) as a backdrop to the choice of artworks in the exhibition. Anthony Bond is the present Director of Curatorial Services at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Anthony Bond was the Artistic Director/Curator of the Biennale of Sydney 1992 entitled *The Boundary Rider*. Bond and Grayson spoke on January 23, 2002.

This is an edited transcript of their discussion, it aligns with the Conceptual Framework in the new Visual Arts HSC syllabus. Grayson and Bond are talking about audiences and the art world. They also refer to conceptual institutional frameworks that influence the selection of artworks for such festivals of international art.

Teachers can use the transcript, or selected comments, to explore with students the notion of the Biennale of Sydney and aspects of curatorial practice, which address the relationship between audience and the art world. The following questions, for example, may be used to structure investigations:

- What is a biennale and what, if anything, sets the Biennale of Sydney apart from other international biennales (such as Barcelona, Venice or Liverpool).
- What themes have been adopted by the earlier Biennales of Sydney?
- How is the 2002 exhibition, (*The World May Be Fantastic*,

different from the 1998, *Everyday* and 1992, *The Boundary Rider* exhibitions?

- The Biennale of Sydney aims to be a *festival* of international art. How does this notion of a festival affect the choices of artworks?
- Is the influence of Dada and Marcel Duchamp evident in the works of the 2002 biennale? (Refer to *The Ready-made Boomerang* 1990).
- Is it apparent why the artists selected for (*The World May Be Fantastic*) fit the theme and why others have been left out?

Biennale of Sydney 2002: (*The World May Be Fantastic*)

AB: Were artists and curators interested in the Biennale of Sydney 2002 and enthusiastic about participating?

RG: I must say, it was a very unexpected and cheering realisation, of how well the Sydney Biennale is thought of. Alana Heiss of PS1, the contemporary artspace and studio complex of MOMA, raved about it. She was talking about how she'd followed it closely over 25 years, how it had always been very brave, how it had made moves that were unexpected and had been prescient. I thought, wouldn't it be nice if the Australia Council could hear this! I think this response to the Sydney Biennale has something to do with its

history, the fact that it has been around for some time.

AB: One of the positive responses I've heard has been that Sydney has stuck with the idea of having a curator and working with a theme. And this is where prescience comes in, discovering the brightest new thing and capturing a sort of Zeitgeist.

RG: I think Sydney finds it easier to do such things. With other Biennales there is this flattening, because they're looking for novelty and they must make a difference between each other. In Sydney, it's a slightly different thing: you're automatically standing to one side of the major dynamics of a lot of the other shows, which I think does allow you to do some interesting work.

AB: Do you think having a theme is a positive, a plus, for Sydney?

RG: I think, on the whole, the theme is a positive, but I also think that it should be up to Sydney not to have a theme if it doesn't want to. I don't think there is one model.

AB: As a curator of a Biennale myself, I found having a theme made it a great deal easier to focus the selection.

RG: Yes, it is so much cleaner. I've found myself in the situation of having, out of ten of my favourite artists, only two of them in the show—people who I'm absolutely passionate about, but they just don't fit. And that is useful, and clearing. I do think that something slightly

more structured and partial is more effective for me than if it were just a diagnostic show. And with so many other shows in the world diagnosing the state of things, it's like a cacophony of doctors.

AB: Your theme is, I think, something which does capture the spirit of the moment, and if you could perhaps expand a little on this idea...

RG: I hope the rationale operates like a platform on which diverse expressions can be placed and happen. It's looking at artists who use fictions, hypotheses, modelling in the macro as well as in the micro sense, to look at alternatives. These alternatives may or may not be practical or real. Some of them do have a utopian political bent, others are plain crazed, perhaps. It's all about trying to fold back on the idea of the *everyday* and, in a way, the *commonsensical* to reveal even more about these concepts.

One of the great, dangerous things we're living through at the moment is the rule of the *everyday* and the *commonsensical*, which is being used to justify more and more outrageous oppressions and dullnesses. So hopefully things that we take as *real* might become slightly hallucinatory and crazed. I didn't come up with the theme to trigger something. I came up the idea for very specific reasons, sitting in my studio, thinking about some people's work that I've been actively engaged with.

It could also be seen as being reactionary and romantic,

and if the show ends up reinforcing the idea of the artist as the crazed, loopy genius on the edge of society, thinking weird thoughts and getting messages from Venus, I'll be deeply upset. It's a risk.

I do think that the Sydney Biennale has significant financial issues—everything that has made it valuable and glorious so far is under direct threat. It gets harder and harder to get government support, and a lot of the competition can offer so much more. The Sydney Biennale can't commission work—whether that is good or bad, it would be nice to have the liberty.

AB: So Richard, you started out as a "non-Biennale" person, never really having been to one, but now you're trekking around, doing the international circuit and meeting all the people, and actually working with artists in the context of a Biennale. Has this changed you?

RG: It has made me both more cynical and less cynical about the whole international Biennale world—more cynical in as much as I don't think the shows themselves are working as hard as they could. And less cynical because it really does blow apart this idea of an international conspiracy in art networking. There seem to be a whole lot of people who accidentally end up in this scene, who haven't networked. You can be a strange Finnish artist just doing your stuff, and something will happen.

Transcribed by Biennale volunteer
Christiane Ayling.

A hard copy of the Biennale education kit will be available through the Biennale of Sydney office, see the web site:
www.biennaleofsydney.com.au

Major venues are AGNSW; MCA and Customs House: Object Galleries, City Exhibition Spaces.

The Biennale of Sydney 2002 will be open in the Art Gallery of NSW from 15 May to 14 July.

Artexpress

Regional Tour 2

Newcastle

Newcastle Region Art Gallery
Laman St
22 April–26 May 2002
Tue–Sun 10am–5pm
Public Holidays 2pm–5pm
Telephone: 4974 5100

Campbelltown

Campbelltown City
Bicentennial Art Gallery
Art Gallery Rd
3 June–7 July 2002
Tue–Sat 10am–4pm
Sun and Public Holidays 12–4pm
Telephone: 4620 1333

Wollongong

Wollongong City Gallery
Cnr Kembla & Burelli Sts
15 July–18 August 2002
Tue–Fri 10am–5pm
Weekends & Public Holidays
12–4pm
Telephone: 4228 7500

Bathurst

Bathurst Regional Gallery
70–78 Keppel St
23 August–6 October 2002
Tue–Sat 10am–5pm
Sun and Public Holidays 2–5pm
Telephone: 6331 6066

Coffs Harbour

Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery
Cnr Coff and Duke Streets
30 October 2002–25 January
2003
Wed–Sat 10am–4pm
Telephone: 6648 4860