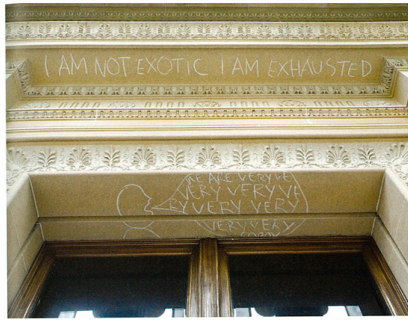


Review Exhibitions



Dan Perjovschi, *The Sydney Drawing* (2008), chulk drawing, Art Gallery of New South Wales

**Revolutions –
Forms That Turn**

2008 Biennale of Sydney, 18 Jun – 7 Sep 2008

The latest installment of one of Australia's most important exhibitions of contemporary international art proves profoundly memorable and inspiring

WORDS: Daniel Palmer

"Of course, the 2008 Biennale is not the only story of revolutions. Indeed, it ranks with the similarly Eurocentric 1999 Melbourne Biennial as the most stimulating exhibitions of international art seen in Australia in the past decade"

Why was the 2008 Biennale of Sydney so good? As a theme, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's "Revolutions – Forms That Turn" proved multidimensional. On the one hand it brought in political revolutions from the Paris Commune, to 1917 Russia to the "neo-liberal revolution" of 1989. Yet the documentary impulse associated with politically engaged art that we have seen a lot of since Documenta 11 in 2002 – as in the 2006 Biennale of Sydney "Zones of Contact" – was largely absent. In its place was an emphasis on revolutionary form, which ensured a privileged place for aesthetics and embodied responses. Effervescence replaced earnestness.

Revolutions turned into a lot of roundness and revolving – spinning, looping, rotating, things upside down, and lots of wheels. Conceptually, the Biennale began with Duchamp's upturned bicycle wheel. In a multiple series of experiences, the theme reanimated a selective history of the 20th-century European avant-garde. Christov-Bakargiev resuscitated a version of this history, starting with the Futurists and Constructivists and working through the kinetic, sound, op and conceptual art that in many ways flowed out of them. Looming large were figures such as Len Lye, John Cage and Bruce Nauman. As in Yoko Ono's telephone that promised to ring, every attention was given to possible or imagined spectator participation. Unlike last year's Documenta 12, which also brought old and new works together on formal grounds, this art-historical teleporting was remarkably refreshing. The associations established between works was more intelligent and less reverential,

enhanced by the unusually useful free exhibition guide. The overall feel was analogical and decidedly low-tech, not surprising given the curator's investment in Arte Povera (her book on the subject was published in 1999).

Christov-Bakargiev's Biennale brought us two unforgettable major commissions. William Kentridge's *I am not me, the horse is not mine* (2008) featured multiple projections of disjointed figures, animated drawings and collages in silhouette, inspired by Gogol's 1830 play *The Nose* (and accompanied by a relentlessly imaginative one-off performance). In *The Murder of Crows* (2008) Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller scattered 100 black speakers at Pier 2/3 at Walsh Bay, with a lone vintage megaphone horn in the centre, enveloping spectators in an evocative dreamscape of voice and sound.

The talking point of the Biennale was its main venue – Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour – and getting there on the free ferry service made it a collective adventure. A former convict-era jail and, more recently, a shipyard, its sandstone cliffs and industrial buildings provided an extraordinary stage for some of the Biennale's best works. Many pieces thrived at the site – such as TV Moore's panting jogger reverberating in an underground tunnel, Susan Phillips's melancholy rendition of the [socialist anthem] *The Internationale*, and Vernon Ah Kee's decaying toilet block covered in racist graffiti. Even whole buildings were revolting. Mike Parr presented a retrospective survey of his confronting performance videos in a sequence of filthy rooms stinking of urine.

The island featured an astonishing number of compelling recent video works. Mark Boulos presented a

brilliant two-screen work juxtaposing belief and fetishism in a devastating critique of Mobil oil and its expropriation of wealth. On one massive screen, a Nigerian fisherman with a large knife shakes with fury; on the other, London traders speculate on oil futures in a frenzy of belief. Other significant videos included Jeremy Deller's now canonical restaging of a British miner's strike, *The Battle of Orgreave* (2002); Gerard Byrne's fascinating dramatic re-enactment of science-fiction writers predicting the future in 1963; and Richard Bell's *Scratch an Aussie* (2008), featuring the artist as psychoanalyst for a cast of all-Australian blonde racists.

The exterior of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) were adorned with political messages, the former featuring Dan Perjovschi's witty drawings, and the latter Sam Durant's acidic acerbic appropriation of anti-racist protest slogans. Inside, Nedko Solakov had workers painting the foyer walls of the Gallery from black to white and back again. Downstairs, Francis Aljys's trail of video monitors in a corner of the galleries showed a variety of perspectives of a man tripping in the street. Into this relativised world rang Atsuko Tanaka's pioneering spatialised audio piece from 1956 (the bell sounding along the length of the gallery depending on how long you pressed the button). Nearby, revolutions were explored in such different modes as Stuart Ringholt's anger workshops, Jean Tinguely's staged sculptural explosions and Rebecca Horn's pointed metal rod gliding through a series of domestic doors. A room with a video and "direct democracy" blackboard by Joseph Beuys entered

into a cross-generational conversation with Raquel Ormella's whiteboards inspired by the Wilderness Society.

The MCA became another platform for sensual and spatial incursions, from singular photographs on bare walls to artists cutting into the walls, and all kinds of things hanging from the ceiling (including Maurizio Cattelan's taxidermied horse in the same room as Aleksandr Rodchenko's photographs and suspended spatial constructions). Next door, mobiles of a different kind by Alexander Calder were dramatised by Olafur Eliasson's oscillating light/fan. In case this sounds too breezy, a TV played Guy Debord's film admonishing the society of the spectacle – an idea, rather than an experience, with no chairs or subtitles provided – while a hole in the wall framed a postcard of a giant Ferris wheel sent to the curator by artist Hans Schabus. Christov-Bakargiev makes a good case for the value of artists' impulse to revolt. But revolutions aren't all glamorous or easy to finance. Hence Tony Schwensen's sausage sizzle outside the MCA – a tongue-in-cheek attempt to raise funds for the 2010 Biennale.

About the only criticism levelled at this Biennale is that it was Eurocentric. Indeed, the Italian-based curator apologised in advance for working to her strengths. Of course, the 2008 Biennale is not the only story of revolutions. Indeed, it ranks with the similarly Eurocentric 1999 Melbourne Biennial as the most stimulating exhibitions of international art seen in Australia in the past decade. If the exhibition itself was only a "decoy" for the more subversive space of creative encounters – as the curator claimed – this decoy was a profoundly memorable and inspiring one.