



NO BIG PICTURE

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Through its title *On Reason and Emotion*, the *Biennale of Sydney* promises much, but overall its rewards are limited – indeed, it is the sort of generic title used with frequent regularity to designate international surveys of contemporary art. Thematically, *On Reason and Emotion* is encompassing enough to accept virtually anything under its theoretical umbrella. The dual concepts ‘reason’ and ‘emotion’ are clichéd enough to also encourage general audiences with the promise of traditionalist representations of the function of art, that is, to provoke thought and arouse emotion. Of course there is more to it than this. The pairing of the words ‘reason’ and ‘emotion’ immediately conjures the Enlightenment philosophy of Immanuel Kant and the eighteenth century differentiation between the world of the mind and that of the body, the former being historically attributed far greater hierarchical significance. This intentional reinvestigation of the philosophical mind-body split is by no means new either, as it thoroughly informed the innumerable and often correctionally orientated discourses of ‘The Body’ that flooded cultural studies, especially during the 1980s.

However, perhaps there is a provocative dimension to this linguistic couplet given the contemporary political climate. Perhaps the invocation of ‘reason’ and ‘emotion’ in the context of this exhibition is aimed at providing some cultural antidote to the virulent neo-liberalist, neo-enlightenment ideals currently dominating politics, as Western empires are

flagrantly erected from the rubble of vanquished cities. Ironically however, the era in which we are living is often classified ‘post-colonial,’ that is, founded supposedly on the desire to seriously rethink the many failings of the historical Enlightenment and the West’s hundreds of years of paternalistic and opportunistic meddling in the affairs of other nations. There is even further irony when we realise that the extraction of intellectual, material and cultural wealth obtained from such nations was actually carried out in the perversely idealistic belief that such processes were ‘natural’ and right. So rather than a ‘post-colonial’ age it would appear unfortunately, that what we are living is actually an era of *neo-colonialism* that simultaneously feeds the divine face-off between warring contemporary fundamentalisms and leaves no room for subtlety or complexity. Under such circumstances then, surely it is culture’s role to restore complexity to this situation, to demonstrate that wars are often forged precisely on reasoned principles and guided by elevated emotions. Indeed, there aren’t any contemporary indicators of a lack of reason in the world or of emotion and neither is there much evidence to suggest that people still believe such definitions are innately separate. For instance, the dominance of neo-liberalist econometrics is superbly reasoned, a harmonious theoretical system if ever there was one. Conversely popular culture is obsessed with emotional entanglements and their display, particularly in film and television, where dramas that constantly claim to reveal something inherent about human nature or the human spirit are presented. Furthermore, such reiterations of the human

are equally tied to the economics of reason. Similarly, and despite the fact that wars are usually excused on the grounds that they are necessary [but ultimately regrettable] – and even if they are reasoned opportunistically in terms of potentially increased profits or global domination – this does not prevent those who participate in them from finding pleasure in war. No one wants to admit this, let alone governments or the military. And in the end isn’t reliance on such predictable conceptual categories rather regressive, revealing something also about the equally diplomatically regressive and populist form contemporary politics has taken recently in the West and elsewhere?

Alongside this transformation of contemporary politics – deeply affected also by its global corporatisation – is the parallel corporatisation of contemporary culture in which populism is a goal similarly pursued. The corporate and commercial overtaking of state politics we are witnessing under globalisation significantly influences the identity of contemporary art as well. Therefore cultural institutions are increasingly called upon to rationalise their procedures and *modus operandi* on the basis of economics and populist statistics. This would suggest that the thinking behind the exhibition and its title, *On Reason and Emotion*, promises something for everyone. The advertisements for the *Biennale of Sydney* screened regularly on local TV networks would further suggest this. In it, we see a carefully chosen cross section of the populace approaching a locked door in an empty and cavernous concrete space. The audience transgresses age, gender and racial

definitions and indicates if anything, that the *Biennale of Sydney*, *On Reason and Emotion*, may excite, it may enrage, it may provoke but it certainly will not leave anyone indifferent. This railing against indifference, despite its recognisable place within contemporary conceptual discourse stemming from Marcel Duchamp’s critique of the empty ‘retinal’ value of modern art, may be seen as yet another attempt to promote contemporary art for its popularity. Therefore [and once again] true to expectation, contemporary art is invoked for its revelatory capability and its ability to stir the emotions, as if such affects were not frequently all too easily achieved in the pivotal relationship between contemporary media propaganda and its ability to produce ‘popular’ opinion. This fear of indifference is likewise linked to growing expectations that contemporary art *should* provide entertainment and even more so, that it now *needs* to compete with the popularity of mass media forms. This is of course an impossible ask, especially for a discipline still generally regarded as marginal and certainly in relation to the popular art of *The Simpsons* for instance.

Nevertheless, the tone of *On Reason and Emotion* is curiously one of non-entertainment, even of indifference. It avoids emphasising the contemporary prominence of high-end media technologies, and even when these are employed they are utilised on a purely functionalist basis. There are numerous works in the show that appear awkward and deliberately unglamorous. At the same time, underlying *On Reason and Emotion* is the evocation of an aesthetics of

impoverishment. In this there is almost something provocative: a deliberate withdrawal from the high-tech, big-budget entertainment expectations of many contemporary *Biennales* around the world. Instead, this *Biennale* evokes frequently pared-back iconographies in which lone and isolated images come to the fore, rather than proliferate within complex visual and conceptual frameworks. Yet this general poverty of means is both surprising and disappointing. On the one hand, it often avoids echoing the divinely positivist rhetoric of contemporary neo-enlightenment, neo-liberalist attitudes as they forge still further ahead in their creation of a global situation of paranoia and ideological deadlock. On the other hand, it occasionally reiterates a simplicity that is unfortunately simply that. Therefore, a contemporary global quest for easy answers is also apparent in some of the work in this *Biennale*. In such instances minimalist means conjure nothing in excess of the tame self-referentiality of individual works themselves, works that become mere 'art' in yet another prestigious global art exhibition. Yet, can art be expected to provide any more these days, can anything more be asked of it in an era of simulated, yet conspicuously hollow and brutally manipulative political idealism? It is a question that ought to be forcefully vital to an exhibition like this – an exhibition further couched in terms of the contemporary division of the globe, geographically in terms of north and south, economically in terms of wealth and poverty and most revealingly politically, in terms of the reactionary and not-so-reactionary. The sad absence of an apparent global political alternative is central to this exhibition and accounts for the rather hollow critique that sustains it at times.

The critical hollowiness that occasionally mars this *Biennale* arises not only out of the artificial separation of 'reason' and 'emotion' but also from the equally artificial separation of north and south that partially informs it. Yet this polarity, said to replace the old East/West distinction of Cold War politics, raises some interesting questions. For instance, it is obvious that the international contemporary art scene has traditionally been determined according to the imperatives of Europe and North America. Not surprisingly these regions are also traditionally most economically prosperous and have the largest markets for contemporary art. The emphasis on a North/South axis supposedly challenges the previous domination of contemporary culture by the global North, the South ideally providing much needed opposition to redress such a top-heavy situation. Is this really the case however? Doesn't it seem more evident that the South, rather than challenging Northern values is simply increasingly colonised by them? Indeed *Biennales* of contemporary art are still most often predicated on the basis of Northern rationalism and its related econometrics. This would also explain, as much as it is quite feasible that near identical contemporary idioms can appear simultaneously unbeknownst to each other and why it is frequently more often the case that global contemporary art is saturated with increasingly normative values defined

by northern European and especially northern American standards. Formally therefore, every global *Biennale* has its fair share of readily transportable glossy cibachrome photographs, documentarian videos, rather discreet installations and isolable sculptural objects. Of course these forms themselves are not necessarily the problem. It would be difficult and perhaps untenuously idealistic to imagine the situation any differently. After all, what *is* the alternative but some imagined zone of absolute difference rendered absolutely unachievable by the global interconnectedness of everything including money, art and politics? Still, the critical agency possible via a cultural reconceptualisation of the global positioning of the South does suggest some genuinely interesting possibilities. For example, is it possible to imagine a *Biennale* stretching predominantly across the Southern Hemisphere through Australia, New Zealand, Asia, the Pacific Islands, Latin America and Africa for example? Would not such a gesture actually provide some notion of criticism in face of the traditional global dominance of the North where the greatest percentage of global profits is still located? It could be argued that such a gesture was falsely exclusionary in a world irrevocably marked by the totalising 'new world' ethos of globalisation. Who drives such an ideology though? Globalisation is most definitely the product of an economistic – and to a lesser degree, with the gradual and lamentable usurping of politics by corporate interests – political ideology. Some would say no-one, no one state [in a supposedly stateless world], no unified conglomeration of nations directing the globalisation process. The claim however that globalisation is a more or less spontaneous historical, transcultural and ultimately altruistic blossoming is surely [hopelessly] Hegelian. Revealingly, those who most fervently make such claims are also those firmly entrenched within the system of Western economic and political privilege. It seems obvious that those most likely to benefit from the ideology of globalisation are those most capable and most willing to maximise its Western neo-liberalist imperatives. In cultural terms, globalisation is like a reborn avant-garde that has dispensed with postmodern complexity, driven by Western colonialist assumptions – idealistic or otherwise – and expects everyone else to catch-up or be excluded. Alternatively, the emphasis on globalisation as an essentially inclusory process defuses the genuine threat posed to the global North by the sheer extent of uncontrollable global difference and the proliferation of potential sites of dissent that result. It also conceals the North's continuing and partly unconscious recognition of itself as dominant and superior.

Adding further anxiety is the manner in which self-definitions of Otherness, as part of a previously excluded global South for example, play all too readily into the hands of Western global imperatives and expectations. The South still *plays* the South and fulfils its role as an interesting and possibly provocative, though ultimately lesser global entity. This represents a further conundrum still, for to imagine that either the North or South is a unified entity in itself is

also obviously absurd. On the other hand, to alternatively disregard the hierarchical stratification of the globe, as though under globalisation power were no longer an issue, is either patently opportunistic or simply ignorant. To disclaim critical coherence on the grounds that concepts of difference and its institutional packaging are today irrelevant may result then in outcomes like the 2004 *Biennale of Sydney*.

Overall, *On Reason and Emotion* is marked by a conceptual fragmentation that in the end only confirms the importance of individual creative personalities and presents itself as a miscellaneous collection of disparate artworks whose connections are ultimately arbitrary. The desire to do justice to the complexity of global frameworks while avoiding recourse to modernist meta-narratives is quite different from assuming a passive middle-ground of the sort actively

Opposite: AES+F, *Action Half Life, Episode 3 #8*, 2003
Photo courtesy the artists and the *Biennale of Sydney*
Below: Annetta Kapon, *Owls to Athens*, 1997
Photo courtesy the artist and the *Biennale of Sydney*

espoused in contemporary western politics. A solution to this problem may have been to emphasise the procedural formation of the exhibition – its deliberately conceived global unfolding in the site-specific context of Sydney. This would have reiterated as well the contemporary networked identity of global contemporary culture and its inherent complexities.

That the *Biennale of Sydney* reads like a series of more or less isolated texts does not however deny the effectiveness of individual works. Some of the most incisive work in this *Biennale* is also the most minimal. For example, the



collaborative text work of the Johannesburg based artist Thomas Mulcaire and Brazilian artist Amanda Rodrigues Alves is of particular local significance. In their piece provocatively titled, *Project for Sydney*, the words 'Sorry' and 'No Worries,' face each other across an otherwise empty gallery space. The simplicity of this gesture in the loaded context of the Art Gallery of New South Wales resonates with a particularly sardonic criticality. The word 'Sorry,' reiterates the Australian Government's repeated refusal to apologise to the Aboriginal nation for past colonial transgressions, while denying there ever was a so-called 'stolen generation' of forcibly removed Aboriginal children. 'No Worries' recounts the blasé, *laissez-faire* attitude so beloved of the national consciousness, only in this instance it suggests a deliberate and strategically 'dumb' apathy. Some would question the right of artists from 'outside' to critically call attention to tender domestic issues as ethically incorrect. Yet the mere fact that visiting artists are so aware of such issues surely raises some disturbing evidence of the poor regard with which Australia is held today in certain international quarters. Angolan artist Fernando Alvim also uses text to critical ends. His work, *A Flag Life* [2000–1] ascribes blank flag-shaped pieces of cloth with culturally and politically loaded values like 'loved', 'hated', and 'murdered'. As an inanimate object though, can a flag really be murdered? Of course not, and by raising such seemingly self-evident but in fact ideologically complex questions, Alvim simultaneously provokes some pointed issues about the arbitrary and abstract nature of nationalistic identification. Of course, Angola, the artist's country of birth, has suffered much as a result of wars arising from its post-colonial destabilisation. Alvim implies that to sacrifice one's life for a piece of material to which ideology has been attached is ridiculous. At the same time, he infers the ritualistic and fetishised nature of flags and the extent to which individuals and nations are prepared to submit before they are willing to concretely question the often war-like actions they incite. *A Flag Life* implicitly asks, in a globalised context constantly said to be 'post-nation,' what a global flag might be, will it be blank or simply irrelevant or will it be as empty opportunistic as the ideology from which globalisation appears to spring?

Obviously globalisation rhetoric, especially in its economic guise, is full of promises to those most desperate for the benefits said to automatically occur from Western democratisation. In his video installation, *White Wall Travelling*, French artist Mélik Ohanian doubts the arrival of globalisation's promised benefits. This work laments instead the ruthless manner by which economic globalisation renders particular locations meaningless. His long panning views of the abandoned Liverpool docklands not only attest to the passing of a particular working class identity but also conjure the immensity of similarly reduced sites around the world. The levelling that occurs through the impetus of global economics testifies now to the existence of entire strata of immensely barren, ex social-industrial spaces constituting a transnational terrain of absolute emptiness. In this way, once

thriving working class areas are remaindered, their histories ignored like the supposedly 'defunct' presumptions of class on which they depended, as one form of virulent capitalism replaces another.

Other questions about the nature of contemporary democracy are also raised, playfully by the Singaporean artist Lim Tzay Chuen and mournfully by the New York based Venezuelan, Javier Téllez. Lim's *A Proposition*, cites the institutionalised identity of the contemporary art gallery to question the political import of such spaces. Lim invited anonymous *Biennale*-goers to enter a competition whose first prize was the chance to exhibit at Artspace as part of the *Biennale of Sydney*, plus four thousand dollars and four nights accommodation in a Sydney hotel. The winner had to present as many copies of page one of the *Biennale* catalogue as they could collect within a designated time frame. This proposition inherently implies that participation in such internationally visible contemporary cultural events is dependent as much on luck as on wilful entrepreneurial savvy. More critically it perhaps also suggests the extent to which large-scale international exhibitions of contemporary art have been transformed by an exclusionary prize-orientated mentality into globally scattered, novelty-based entertainment. In this way, professional visibility replaces art as the semi-autonomous practice of cultural critique, a notion neo-conservative members of the arts fraternity consider 'old-fashioned' in any case. Finally and in strict contrast to the previous work, Javier Téllez's *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc [Rozelle Hospital]* [2004], pairs scenes from Carl Dreyer's silent 1928 film on the life and death of Joan of Arc and interviews with patients from Sydney's Rozelle Psychiatric Hospital. The results are surprisingly non-voyeuristic and unsentimental while at the same time moving. A host of issues regarding the nature of contemporary social exclusion are addressed in this work as well as the paradoxical and traditionally valorised proximity of art to madness. Rather than clichéd and sensationalist though, Téllez's work, which relies on the candid and often harrowing accounts of Rozelle inmates, interrogates the contemporary function of institutions in general and not just that of hospitals. The siting of this work in the institutional space of the Museum of Contemporary Art further implies the participation of such spaces within much greater discourses, the most prevalent today perhaps being the discourse of globalisation. Yet this discourse, actually a series of interrelated discourses, rather than issuing-in the arrival of an enlightened new age seems instead to threaten the invigoration of global neo-medievalist fundamentalisms. The use of Dreyer's film with its emphasis on crude institutionalised violence resounds then with an uncanny and disturbing contemporary relevance. Any success of *On Reason and Emotion*, arises precisely from such isolated moments, by no means dismissible, rather than from any unifying conceptual rigour.

