

REPORT FROM SYDNEY

The Wheel Is Turning

A high-spirited, nuanced selection stirred up venues old and new at the latest Sydney Biennale.

BY GREGORY VOLK



Mark Boulos: *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 2008, two-channel video installation, 30 minutes. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Jenni Carter.

At first glance, the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, titled "Revolutions—Forms that Turn," evoking artistic or political upheaval and liberation movements, seemed like a comfortable fit with various other exhibitions of its ilk. A renowned curator, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, from the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art in Turin, provided the now requisite "vision" for the biennial. She selected a sprawling assortment of 180-plus artists, who exhibited throughout the city, mainly at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Pier 2/3 on the waterfront, the nonprofit gallery/think-tank Artspace and—in a first for the Biennale—Cockatoo Island, out in the harbor. In addition, an extensive online venue made at least part of the show available to a wide audience, while abundant lectures, symposia and artist's talks provided the educational component. Everything seemed perfectly in place for yet another socially conscious biennial extravaganza to take its place among dozens (and counting) of others. So it was lovely to find instead a richly idiosyncratic, brilliantly curated exhibition, chock-full of layers and surprises having much to do with the multiple connotations of the word "revolution."

The term signals, of course, crisis and catharsis, and there were a number of excellent works about revolutionary energies or particularly fraught sociopolitical issues. Among the themes addressed was the oftentimes difficult relationship between Aboriginal and white Australians. In his video *Scratch an Aussie* (2008), for instance, the provocative Aboriginal artist Richard Bell, dressed up like a black Sigmund Freud, masquerades as a psychoanalyst conducting therapy sessions with prominent white Australians. As his patients ruminate about their worries and concerns, a crude and virulent national racism bubbles up from the unconscious like some toxic lava. Hilarious and profoundly unsettling, Bell's snappy video turns the cultural tables; instead of white Australians or foreigners speculating about the Aboriginal psyche, an Aboriginal artist-cum-Western psychoanalyst exposes the intractable fears, biases and racial stereotypes lodged in the white psyche.

Occupied (2008), a work by Melbourne-based artists Destiny Deacon (Aboriginal) and Virginia Fraser (white), who have frequently collaborated over the past decade, was situated at Sydney's much-visited Royal Botanic Gardens. This is a locale of great sig-

nificance to Aboriginal people, having served as the site of initiation rites long before British colonization. The piece consisted of a small tent inhabited by lifelike figures made of inflated nylon tubes. As you voyeuristically pecked inside this illuminated tent, electric fans caused the figures, positioned as people in sleeping bags, to agitatedly shift about as if frightened by the encroaching outside world. In a nation of travelers—Australians often go on the road for months at a time—a routine activity suddenly turned ominous and implicitly suggested uneasy white campers intruding on Aboriginal territory. It also suggested the anxiety and dislocation Aborigines might feel in traveling through a suspicious, occupied country.

Broadening the issue of racism was Los Angeles-based American Sam Durant, who adorned the MCA's facade with yellow, red and blue electric signs featuring texts in black vinyl ("Ask Us What We Want," "200 Years of White Lies," "End White Supremacy"). The signs glowingly re-create scrawled slogans used years ago in Aboriginal rights protests in Australia, and in African-American and Native American civil rights movements in the U.S. In reclaiming and transforming decades-



Attila Csörgö: *Slanting Water*, 1995, black and white photograph, 11 by 16 inches. Collection Mark Cucek, courtesy Galerija Gregor Podnar, Ljubljana/Berlin.



Bari Kumar: *Army of Forgotten Souls*, 2005, video, 3 minutes. Courtesy Bose Pacia Gallery, New York.

1911 Futurist painting *La Rivolta* (*The Revolt*), a partly abstract, partly architectural scene suffused with pulsating energy vectors signaling an unfettered future; a video of Valie Export's 1968 action *Inpp und Tastkino* (*Touch Cinema*), in which passersby on streets in Munich and Vienna were invited to touch the artist's breasts through an opening in a cardboard stage covering her naked torso; Bruce Nauman's partly earnest, partly ironic 1967 neon with the spiraling message "The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths"; a video of Gordon Matta-Clark's last architectural

incision in 1977; and Gianni Colombo's *Spazio Elastico* (*Elastic Space*), 1967, a three-dimensional grid of elastic cords bathed in ultraviolet light in an otherwise dark room, which subtly expands and contracts, and seems both magical and ethereal. Most of these touchstone works hail from Europe and the U.S., a fact that imparted a distinct Western slant to the idea of revolution in art—though many were being shown in Australia for the first time, which was enormously valuable for a domestic audience. Often they were juxtaposed with more recent or entirely current works, likewise

displaying a radical spirit of adventure and experimentation, that were culled from many places.

The Art Gallery of New South Wales housed quite a number of the historical works. Dan Perjovschi, from Romania, marked up one facade of this imposing edifice with his trademark doodles, cartoonish vignettes and scrawled messages, in this case rendered in white chalk. Perjovschi's temporary work, which looked like especially intelligent vandalism, was at once comical and caustic, probing a contemporary world engulfed by rampant consumerism and fractious ideologies ("I like your ideas," one enthusiastic man exclaims to another, who matter-of-factly replies, "I like your Mercedes"). Duchamp's bicycle wheel was bookended by two videos involving bicycles. One, by Klara Liden, from Sweden, shows the artist swinging a metal bar, as she rhythmically and ritualistically attacks a bicycle in an empty apartment, resulting in a wanton act of destruction that becomes oddly meditative and cathartic. The other was a riveting 3-minute, slow-motion video of just the backs of rickshaw drivers in Nellore, India, by Bari Kumar, a Los Angeles-based Indian artist. You never see the drivers' faces, which underscores their marginality and anonymity, yet they are powerful and captivating figures, at once super-present and implacably distant.

The video by Matta-Clark and Nauman's neon sign were placed in rooms to either side of that containing American Michael Rakowitz's ambitious installation linking the visionary Russian Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin with various stories pertaining to the Aboriginal rights movement in Australia. Along two walls were vitrines displaying Rakowitz's intricate drawings and handwritten texts concerning Tatlin's ultimately failed effort to erect his spiraling *Monument to the Third International*, and efforts by such figures as the activist Charles Perkins, one of the organizers of the first Freedom Ride in 1965, a groundbreaking bus tour through New South Wales protesting discrimination against Aboriginal people. In the middle of the room was Rakowitz's homemade, 16½-by-11-foot, full-scale version of Tatlin's model, constructed from scrapwood, cables, wire and corrugated tin salvaged from Aborigine-owned houses in the Sydney neighborhood of Redfern, which may soon be demolished. (Titled *White man got no dreaming*, Rakowitz's project involved extensive collaboration with Aboriginal organizations and individuals.) Topped with a small Aboriginal flag, this rickety monument commemorated faltering yet persistent attempts at liberation and transcendence. It also doubled as a broadcast tower for Koori Radio, Sydney's only Aboriginal radio station.

Christov-Bakargiev's combinations of past and present could be unorthodox and insightful. She highlighted Jean Tinguely, renowned for his kinetic sculptures, with two abstract pieces that jerked into motion when you stepped on a pedal. Also present were detritus from his fabled, par-



Shaun Gladwell: *Ghost Rider*, 2005, installation with video, sculpture and sound. Photo Greg Weight.

tially successful 1960 attempt to blow up his own sculpture in the garden of New York's Museum of Modern Art, and a 1962 David Brinkley television report concerning Tinguely's successful detonation of a sculpture out in the desert at Yucca Flats, Nevada, at the height of the Cold War, in a region of America particularly identified with nuclear testing.

Although they were made decades ago, Tinguely's pioneering works seem entirely fresh, especially when juxtaposed with work by several artists who have taken the whole concept of moving sculptures in very different directions. Renata Lucas, from Brazil, adjusted some of the museum's temporary exhibition walls so you could move them around on their tracks in a broad arc, subjecting the whole space to more or less constant change. Commencing with British settlement in 1788, European visitors to Australia sent home samples of its unique flora and fauna for study and to satisfy curiosity: wonders from Down Under shipped back to the civilized world. American Mark Dion reversed the process, mailing specimens culled from his worldwide travels to Sydney, where they were displayed as unopened packages in a wooden hutch. While you couldn't see what was in them, you could deduce some of their unlikely contents

from customs declarations: a "kitchen item," a metal wheel, children's blocks, a plastic squirrel, etc., sent from such places as Indonesia, France, Spain and various locales in the U.S. They were, in short, not nature's wonders, but the commonplace jetsam and simulacra of nature that are pretty much prevalent everywhere. Francis Alys, a Belgian who has long lived in Mexico, exhibited *Chochos* (2005-06), in which nine monitors dispersed through the space reveal nine different views of the same incident/mishap/instantaneous sculpture: Alys, in his signature high-top Converse sneakers, walks down a sidewalk, trips when a dog darts into his path, pitches forward and sprawls, picks himself up and strides away as if nothing untoward had happened. This seemingly random accident was actually meticulously staged, and while you learn more and more from the various videos (including one shot from the dog's perspective), you realize that each one, far from offering an authoritative account, provides only piecemeal, shifting information. In the meantime, Alys's arranged "accident" has a curious emotional pull, conjuring purposefulness suddenly interrupted by dire surprises, solitary contemplation undermined by an unruly world.

At the MCA, photographs, photomontages and

five small hanging geometric abstractions made of aluminum, wood or plywood by Aleksandr Rodchenko were positioned near Italian Maurizio Cattelan's endlessly controversial *Novecento* (1997), a taxidermy horse drooping from the ceiling in a harness. Animated by 1900s utopianism, the Rodchenkos offered a vivid contrast to the sharply ironic horse, which bid farewell to that beleaguered, deadly century. Meanwhile, a couple of rooms away, Olafur Eliasson's *Light Ventilator Mobile* (1992) careened around, simulating gusting wind and the sun's (or moon's) progression by means of a mobile electric fan and spotlight, while two entrancing, painted sheet-metal and wire mobiles (1940s) by Alexander Calder slowly drifted around. Complementing this series of revolving overhead works were several photographs in a nearby room from Australian Rosemary Laing's "Weather Series" (2006), in which a female figure appears to be flying, flung skyward by a fierce wind blowing colorful shreds of newspaper.

The term "revolution" also connotes circles, circling and things that revolve, either literally or figuratively (hence the subtitle, "Forms that Turn"), and in this sense Christov-Bakargiev's exhibition really excelled. An astonishing array

of circles and curves coursed through the exhibition as looped videos and aerial mobiles, round sculptures and bicycle wheels, carousels and sound waves. When things clicked, which was often, all these multiple connotations of "revolutions" made for an exhibition that was thoughtful and historically informed, but also playful, sometimes whimsical, and intensely poetic. Christov-Bakargiev's linguistic framework—and she is thoroughly aware of the word "revolution's" etymology—opened up to complex and evocative visual forms and procedures in ways that frankly seemed more artistic than curatorial or art-historical.

One of the signature works was *The Murder of Crows* (2008), a new sound installation by Canadians Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, presented in a cavernous hall at Pier 2/3. Seated on wooden chairs in a rough circle, the audience was surrounded by multiple audio speakers emitting a 30-minute musical voyage that

includes a 1941 Russian patriotic song; varied arrangements by composers Tilman Ritter and Freida Abtan; harrowing, nightmarish texts concerning torture, capture and injury softly spoken by Cardiff; and miscellaneous sounds such as the barks of dogs, the flapping of wings, bells, buzzers, crashes, rushing water and a lulling lullaby. These traveled around the room, and as you listened you were propelled inward, toward your own primal fears and wavering aspirations, but also outward, toward an enticing world full of conflicts and coercion.

A sizable room at the MCA was devoted to a single 11-by-16-inch photograph by the Hungarian artist Attila Csörge, featuring two half-filled water glasses on a table (*Slanting Water*, 1995). The scene looks deceptively normal, even banal, but on longer viewing it becomes entirely strange, for—inexplicably, even miraculously—the water slants up to the left in one glass, and up to the

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right in the other. To produce this effect, Csörge placed the two glasses and his camera on a spinning table, creating a centrifugal force that caused the water to slosh up like that. His tableau is at once evidence of a quasi-scientific experiment and a deeply evocative image suggesting calm and repose in a turbulent world buffeted by confusion and dislocation. At the Art Gallery of New South

Rebecca Horn: *Cutting Through the Past*, 1992-93, 5 doors, metal rod and stand, motor. © AES, New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



Refreshingly, most of the works at Cockatoo Island didn't brood on the locale's many historical incarnations, but instead established a much more supple and allusive engagement with the site.

Wales, Rebecca Horn's sculpture *Cutting Through the Past* (1992-93), which involves a horizontal, sharply pointed metal rod constantly revolving in a broad circle and slicing its way through the edges of several old, upright wooden doors with glass windows, manages to be at once rough—even brutal—sensitive, erotic, meditative and menacing, as its sharp pole rhythmically and obsessively advances despite old obstacles.

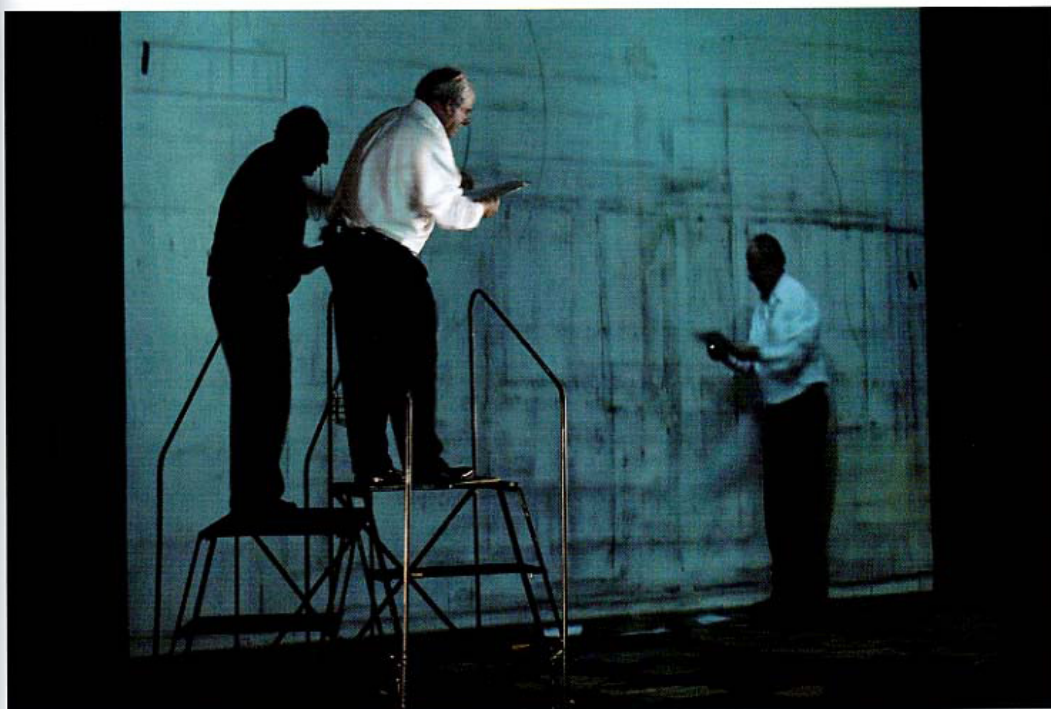
The trailblazing American video and performance artist Joan Jonas debuted a major new performance and corresponding installation called *Reading Dante*, which, although it was not commissioned for Sydney, gave a prominent role to circles (making perfect sense, given the nine circles of Hell in the *Inferno*), including a hypnotically spinning toy Ferris wheel and a video of a woman performing at a circular, modernist architectural ruin in Mexico City, among many others. Also lovely, and touching, was Venezuelan Javier Téllez's video *One Flew Over the Void* (*Bala Perdida*), 2005, realized for the inSite series of public art interventions in San Diego and Tijuana. Patients from a Mexican mental health center stage a circus parade in costume and a performance outdoors, all expressive of their dignity. Hoops roll along a pathway and circus rings are held aloft. At the climax, the American stuntman Dave "Cannonball" Smith is shot from a star-spangled cannon across the border into the U.S. as a gleeful protest against immigration policy.

Each part of the exhibition had its charms, and all included works at once scholarly, adventurous and charged with multiple meanings. Still, Cockatoo Island, undeniably beautiful despite its many architectural ruins and half-ruins, best embodied the exhibition's concerns. The island (incidentally sort of a circle pretty far out in the harbor) belongs to the past but is leaning toward the future. It has had many incarnations, good and bad: an Aboriginal territory for centuries, after European settlement it served as a prison, ship-building facility, residential community and now a mixed-use urban park. Here, every artist had ample room, usually in rough spaces not gussied up to look like pseudo-galleries.

Refreshingly, most of the works here didn't brood on the island's history, but instead established a much more supple and allusive engagement with the site. In a ragged concrete room containing rusted machinery, a single spare loud-speaker installed overhead intermittently played a haunting, a cappella version of the Internationale sung by Scottish artist Susan Philipsz. In this

View of Joan Jonas's performance *Reading Dante*, 2008. Photo Greg Weight.





View of William Kentridge's performance *I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine*, 2008. Photo Greg Weight.

broken-down industrial setting, Philipsz's subdued, solo rendition of the rousing motivational song—spawned by the French Revolution and later adopted by revolutionary movements worldwide—was altogether entrancing, encapsulating fervor and failure, hope through the ages and the ruination of big dreams.

In Chinese artist Chen Xiaoyun's video *<Bi>: A Mythical Wild Animal—Symbol of Durance* (2008), a long-haired, grimacing man with a whip stands on a muddy field, a cross between some mad circus lion tamer, an even madder wild animal with an unruly mane and an alienated shaman. Roaring and grinding blue trucks slowly circle him as he leaps, spins, snarls and repeatedly slashes the mud with his whip, futilely trying to tame or escape from inexorable industrialization. In Australian Shaun Gladwell's slow-motion, nocturnal video *Ghost Rider* (2006), bicyclists perform wheelies and other stunts while riding down empty streets or through a tunnel. Every now and then they hop off, give their bicycles a shove and send them crashing into walls or over curbs, making for a mix of balletic elegance and clattering collisions. In a circuitous warren of threadbare rooms, one discovered a mini-retrospective of provocative, oftentimes harrowing body-based performance videos by another noted Australian

provocateur, Mike Parr, including one in which the artist calmly inserts wooden matchsticks between his teeth, essentially filling his open mouth with a flammable barrier. In another, he holds his breath for so long that he is transformed from a reasonable chap into a demon, a madman, a cross-eyed victim being strangled, before he exhales wildly, gasping for breath. Italian Lara Favaretto's compressed air canisters in a cluster, which loosely resemble bombs or perhaps a military regiment on parade, intermittently "breathe" into and unfurl party whistles, making a festive, percussive, decidedly nonmartial music. You had to climb up a platform to peer into the American Paul Pfeiffer's sizable, extraordinarily intricate model for a stadium perhaps several hundred years in the future. It conjures some ambiguous sport with unknown rules to be witnessed by up to a million people at a pop—ratcheting up entertainment and spectacle to an absurd scale.

The South African William Kentridge presented a wrap-around, multichannel video projection of his animated drawings on the walls of a room that doubled as the set for a remarkable lecture/performance, *I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine*, another of the exhibition's signature works. Kentridge's lecture wound its way elliptically through sundry topics, from Nikolai Gogol's short story

"The Nose" (1836)—in which a man and his nose are mysteriously separated—to sleep, self-scrutiny, the procedures of drawing, an artist's necessary faith undercut by doubt and anxiety, the intact and divided self, the ultimately doomed Russian Communist Nikolai Bukharin's testimony to the Plenum of the Central Committee after his arrest, and how to make a horse from seemingly random and disjointed shapes. There were startling and humorous moments when Kentridge, distracted by the projections, interacted with several lifelike self-portraits. Complete with loops and tangents, twists and turns, this riveting event altogether encapsulated the exhibition. Influences from the past seemed vital and alive, and present consciousness operated as an ever-transformative quest. Full of fleet connections, Christov-Bakargiev's Biennale was among the best and most successful of such exhibitions in years—imaginative, courageous and humanly wise. □

The 16th Biennale of Sydney, "Revolutions—Forms That Turn," was on view June 18-Sept. 7.

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