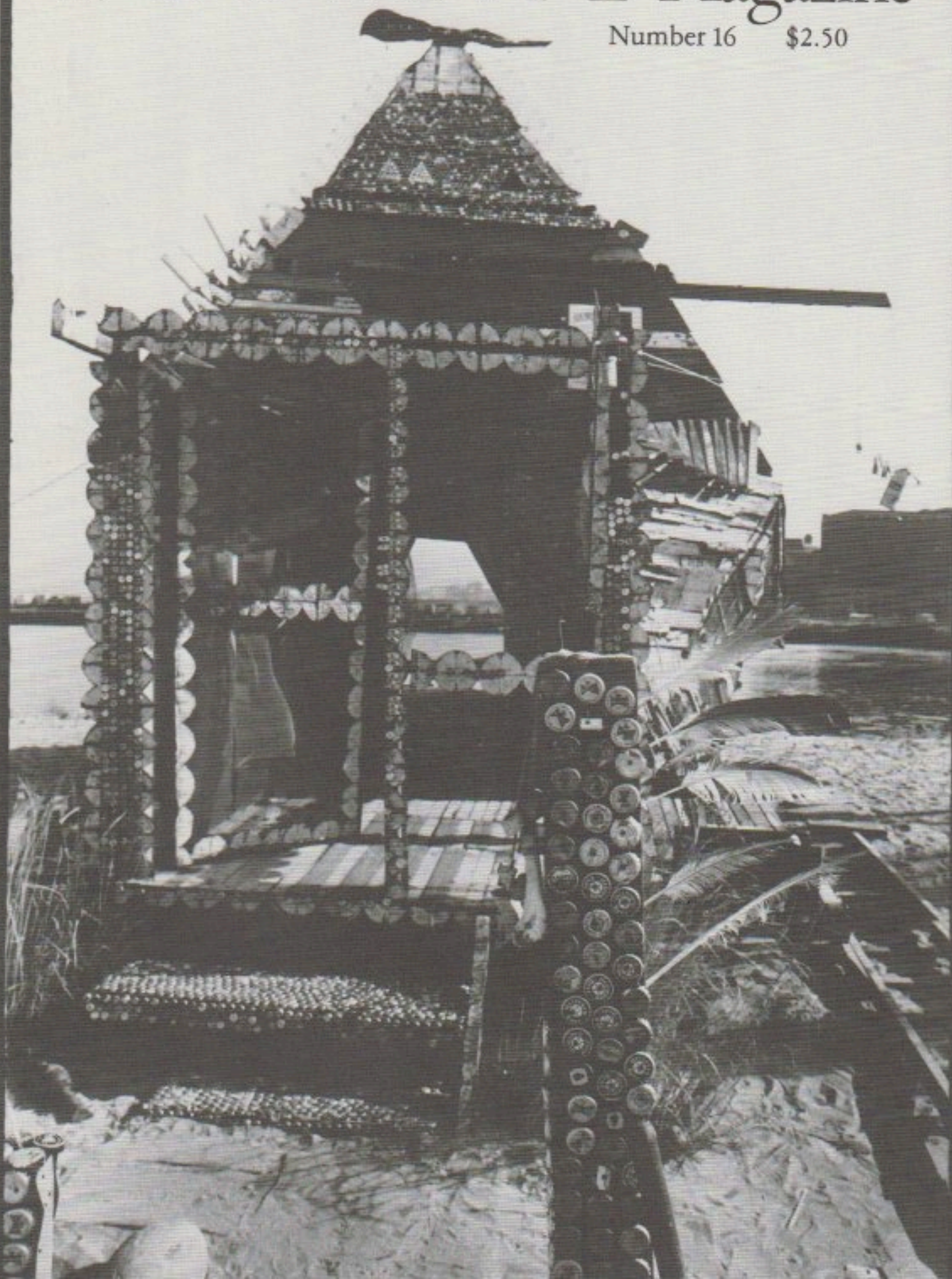


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THE BIENNALE OF SYDNEY, 1986



Revisiting Performance Group: Westjarr Sand Sculpture, performance, May 1986.

by Thomas Lawson and Susan Morgan

The Sixth Biennale of Sydney, curated by Nick Waterlow, opened on May 15. A big, ambitious international show, it included many familiar names and some not so well known. Several things made the exhibition significantly different from other similar shows of the past few years. Firstly, the big names of the Neo-Expressionist movement were absent, and not missed. In recent years we have seen so much of Baselitz and Rupertz, Chia and Cucchi, Schnabel and Clemente, that it was something of a relief to find ourselves spared another encounter. Secondly, we were given a chance to discover that there is more to Australian art than the self-conscious re-workings and re-locations of Imants Tillers, that there is a considerable body of work being made that reflects in an in-

telligent and complex way on the historical and geographical conditions of life in Australia. Most of this work comes from the metropolitan areas of Sydney and Melbourne, but in some ways the most challenging is made by Aboriginal artists living in Papunya and Arnhemland in the Northern Territory, artists who have found a way to connect their tribal traditions with the conventions of Western art in a way that unsettles preconceptions about both. Finally, and most importantly, this Biennale attempted to address a theme, both in the exhibition itself, and in the two weeks of lectures and panel discussions that followed the opening celebrations. Working with the title, "Origins, Originality, and the Beyond", the curator sought to open up a discussion on the

nature and possibilities of the post modern. At its most cogent this discussion broke down to an argument between two camps, those artists, who might be called historical materialists, who work from a political understanding of the power of the image, and who centre their endeavours around the issues raised by representation and appropriation, and those who seek a spiritual effect from art, and who centre their work on the creation of a certain kind of ambience or atmosphere conducive to that effect.

The exhibition filled two separate places, The Art Gallery of New South Wales, which is a fairly typical neoclassical museum building, and The Pier, a dilapidated (but soon to be renovated and turned into shops and restaurants)

structure on the waterfront in the old part of Sydney harbour. Roughly speaking it could be said that the artists involved in appropriation and related strategies were to be found in the Art Gallery, and those seeking a higher path were on the pier. Among the American and European artists included were; Laurie Anderson, Joseph Bewys, James Lee Byars, Miriam Cahn, Jiri Georg Dokoupil, Eric Fischl, Neil Jenney, R. B. Kitaj, Pierre Klossowski, Komar & Melamid, Wolfgang Laib, Thomas Lawson, Sherrie Levine, Agnes Martin, Malcolm McLaren, Bruce McLean, Malcom Morley, Eric Orr, Sigmar Polke, Richard Prince, Gerwald Rockenschau, David Salle, Laurie Simmons, Nancy Spero, Philip Taaffe, and Cy Twombly. We spoke to the following participating Australian artists in the first weeks of the show, about the exhibition and about their work.

John Dunkley Smith

Eds: Do you think the show works as an argument, or is it just a more or less random selection of art objects?

JDS: Well, I find it difficult to understand the inclusion of quite a few people's work, including my own. It's depressing in a personal sense because there is so little that interests me in it. Maybe depressing is the wrong word, but I do find it a problem that a number of clearly unqualified people have been included for what can be called political reasons. In some way that is indicative of the smallness and fragility of the situation here, it's not possible for some people to be excluded without some offense being taken. So in that respect the show fails to reach a credible coherence.

Eds: One interesting aspect of it is the way the whole thing looks somehow uprooted. The work in the Art Gallery looks like it could be anywhere, in any large international show, and the work down at the pier looks very uncomfortable, like it doesn't belong in such declassé surroundings. Here is a location asking for site specific works of some kind, and yet nobody addressed that, they all continued to act as though they were showing in a museum. That seems odd, especially when you think that the show is, in some sense, about location, about Australia being on the other side of the world, and about trying to set up a dialogue between Australian artists

and artists from elsewhere.

JDS: I think the intellectual exchange idea is a bad joke. Most of the European and American artists are like travelling salesmen, slick professionals moving from biennale to biennale to push their wares. What they're interested in is a quickie. They have no real interest in Australia, or at best see the occasion as a chance for an exotic holiday. Which I suppose makes the pier a perfect location in some ways, since it is in the middle of an olde worlde, artsy craftsy tourist area. Which of course is exactly why I think it a terrible spot for a show like this. After coming back here from my last trip to New York, that miserable winter I spent in the PS 1 hellhole, I decided that I wanted to concentrate my attention on Australia, to make my intervention here. But even given that I don't think I'd like to try and do anything with that space.

Eds: But of all the people in the show you might have been able to do something really interesting with that space, since your slide installations are so much about placement and location.

JDS: I could imagine doing something very minimal that might have been an attempt to intensify or concentrate some things that are already there. But I find the look of the pier is just terribly dated. What I would have found interesting to do is something with that big picture window at the Gallery that overlooks the docks. I would like to have been able to do a piece with that view, but the Biennale couldn't afford to commission such a thing, and I didn't have time or money to put it together for this time either. But the pier just looks like it's from another time, and I don't think it was planned to be like that, I don't know that...

Eds: Isn't it the site of *The Beyond*?

JDS: Exactly. I think maybe I can begin to make a distinction between this feeling of depression, and a vaguer disappointment. It's depressing because that's what life is like, maybe it's just that I'm depressive. The disappointment has more to do with a sense of limits. I'm not a terrible chauvinist, but looking at my work here, in the Biennale context, I've come to realise that it looks Australian. And it's not just in the images, it's something else. I don't think it relates to any of the other work in the show.

Eds: Well, the fact that it's a slide presentation separates it from all the paintings and sculptures, but what makes it Australian?

JDS: Perhaps I can define it in negative terms, it doesn't have the concerns that most of the other work has. And I suppose I would want to fall back on the imagery.

Eds: What is the imagery, exactly?

JDS: Oh, I forgot, we're on the radio. One set of images is of almost virgin landscape that I photographed at Nourlangie Rock in Kakadu National Park near Darwin. The rock is a significant Aboriginal site, there are rock paintings and so on, and it is a site of dreaming. Those sites don't appear specifically in the piece, they're not focused upon. The rock is seen more as a foil to the monotony of the plains. The other set of images is of downtown Darwin, which is the capital of the Northern Territory, and it's a pedestrian mall like pedestrian malls worldwide—dying because they're being replaced by regional shopping centres that are being constructed somewhere else. They're related to a particular time, architecturally, in Australia. Originally these two pieces were made as companion pieces, but for this show I combined them partly out of a concern that showing a landscape piece alone would seem a celebration, and be altogether too romantic, when my intention was to deal with the landscape in a non-romantic, matter of fact way.

Eds: It's interesting that you conceived the pieces as separate since the conjunction of images seems to be particularly significant. In the presentation here you layer images of an Aboriginal site, a site of dreaming which is therefore an ideological site, with images of a shopping mall, one of the sites of Western culture's dreamtime, the ideological space of consumerism.

JDS: That comparison was always there, I just hadn't felt the need to spell it out before confronting the idea of an installation here in Sydney. An interesting experience during the installation of the Biennale was when Michael Tjakamarra the Aboriginal painter came and saw the piece. It happened quickly, but I realised I was slightly nervous about it, subject to a complex of what are probably over-



John Darkley-Smith: *Nourlangie Landscape*, three-projector slide installation, 1985.

sensitivities, qualms and questions that wouldn't arise if I were dealing with a location that were completely Western in identity. But the fact that Michael knew the area, both areas, made me quite nervous about how he'd receive it, but he seemed to like it. There is this terrible guilt thing that we're all caught up in and I think it's very easy to become oversensitized by it, and act patronizingly.

Eds: That goes to the heart of the difficulty a lot of us visiting Australia for the first time have in knowing what to think of the Aboriginal presence in the Biennale, and in all the state and national galleries. It seems to sit in a very strange place between art and ethnography. A lot of the time one literally does not know what one is looking at. The use is unclear.

JDS: Yes. This is something I've thought a little bit about and it seems to me that the Aboriginals themselves think of it as a kind of intervention. They're not being appropriated, they're not being steam-rollered. They are making a conscious intervention in white culture. Back in the early Seventies when a number of these artists started working on canvas out in Papunya it was a deliberate decision to play the marketing game, to get art money rather than the puny sums they had been getting for crafts. They probably still don't get enough, but it was a shrewd, and informed decision, and has had an important impact on the Australian scene.

Lyndal Jones

Eds: We found the performances of the Ramifying Group oddly unsettling and it was because they were presented as traditional ceremonies, and yet looked so unlike our expectations of ritual. They were so undramatic. In fact they seemed almost alienated, an effect heightened by the context provided by the Art Gallery. And then, because they were presented at the Gallery, in a show over which the spirit of Beuys hovers, there was a way in which the performers' casualness could be taken as being related to, or even indebted to, aspects of early Seventies performance.

LJ: I find your reactions very interesting because until probably four or five years ago I had similar expectations about ritual, and would have found the Ramifying Group very disappointing. But

then I saw something on television about ritual and tribal ceremony and so forth, and it was clear it has that quality of the everyday in many cases, of people stopping and starting, giggling and talking, and little kids coughing and people wandering off and coming back. I can remember feeling dislocated by that back then, and everything I've learned has only confirmed that aspect. So since then I've come to consider ritual to be much more a normal part of everyday life, and not a theatrical event. Truly like the little daily rituals we have, and as unimpressive. It's that casualness that I find interesting to look at, and of course it's that which brings to mind The Judson Church type of dance and the performance style that grew out of that.

Eds: What you realise watching the Ramifying Group is the tenacity with which we cling to stereotypes and clichés. Because we have seen so many photographs and films of dramatically painted, dressed, and posed performers engaged in any number of tribal rituals we tend to assume that that is how they look, forgetting it is only how particular photographers have made them look. So what remains so impressive about the Ramifying Group is their ability to force this issue in the museum, the very source of most of our received ideas about tribal culture.

Julie Brown-Rrapp

Eds: Do you think there has been much opportunity for dialogue between the Australian artists in the Biennale and those from overseas?

JB-R: I think the dialogue is really patchy. Being asked to participate in the Biennale is one thing — there's so much politicking goes on in a small scene like this. So it's already quite something to be in it, but there is a problem of communication. A problem before hand about what was needed for the catalogue, and when; and then problems about the amount of space available, and the kind of space available. And then there is the same kind of problem with communication now that the show is open and everyone is here. I mean we're invited to all the parties and so on, but there is no real attempt to introduce people. At the various parties at the opening there were administrators walking around with what looked like artists, you know, but nobody introduced me to any of them. I don't

want to sound pathetic, but we all know it's quite hard to walk up and introduce yourself to somebody. You walk up, and then there's this silence, and maybe an awkward smile. You put yourself on the line by putting your work up, and then there's this silence.

There's just so much politics that goes on in these shows, like where your work is hung. You know Lindy Lee was going to be put in the photography gallery, that little basement ghetto, and she nearly died. I told her to get in there and demand to be moved, insist she be put among her peers. You've got to get in there early, and then stay to defend your position. It takes so much time and energy, but you have to do it.

Eds: It's curious about that photography space, because what obviously happened is that several, shall we say less prominent international artists who failed to show up were effectively dumped there.

JB-R: That's right. Everyone who's ever been involved in one of these things knows that. And I just think it's important to point it out. For with this whole thing about the representation of women, which is one of the main concerns of my work, it's important not to get too abstract. It's important to speak of the mechanisms of power, just to underline the details that many women artists ignore, or don't know about, or don't consider. I also think it's important when talking about a show that has all these vague mystical trappings — origins, and the Beyond and so forth — that veil power relations, just to point them out again.

Eds: Well Beyondism is very much a male dominated art movement, a power play disguised as a higher truth. We've talked about the show in a general way, would you like to talk more specifically about your contribution, about the work you exhibited?

JB-R: When I was asked to participate I was in the midst of preparing a show that was to be in three different spaces called "Thief's Journal", and so I was completely preoccupied with that. I had to tell Nick that I couldn't come up with something completely new in two months time. The idea of the three space show was that by spreading the work around I could break down the con-



Julie Brown-Krapp: *La Boleto*, photo emulsion on canvas, 1985.

tainerisation of ideas that usually goes on in an art gallery space. So I wanted to work from this kind of subversive idea, this time using the Biennale as a frame to react within. As a condition of doing that my piece had to appear at the Art Gallery and not the pier, and Nick agreed. The completed piece is called "Break and Enter", and the metaphor involved obviously has to do with various transgressions. I built a kind of secret room filled with stolen treasures, images I had appropriated from a larger idea of the museum, the museum without walls almost, and brought back to a corner of this museum as my work. And then the idea of the gold figure in the back and the narrow entrance way is that the spectator catches a glimpse of treasure and wants to break in. There's that whole Genet text that forms a silent undercurrent to the piece.

But then once you do enter the room, breaking through the narrow entrance, there are actually all these other images which people here at any rate would have seen in the earlier show, but differently. And these works also have a whole lot of technical things that have to do with different ways in which we reuse painted images photographically. I made these photographic reproductions on surfaces that are really intractable so that it contains a visible rupture between image and surface.

Writing in the paper the other day Terence Maloon justified my work as an attack on patriarchal traditions, and today a woman asked me more directly if it weren't to do with rape. But that is only part of the story. I really want to be more subversive than that, because otherwise you get pushed into the lunatic fringe. I mean it happens even when you try to be more complex and subversive — critically all my work is contained within the one narrow rhetoric, and it's not just about that of course. Which is what I was trying to get at in the three gallery show. But most people just want the simple answer.

Lyndal Jones

LJ: One difficulty is that I have a habit of talking about what I do, rather than about what people will see. The reason for that is quite particular. I make a framework of activities and I actually often don't know what people will see. Although it's easier in this kind of situation to describe a number of images so that people can get an immediate idea of what's going on, I prefer to talk about

what I do, and you can interrupt to ask what something looks like.

This particular performance, "Prediction Piece 8", like some others I've done, is made up of a number of segments. The segments are twenty minutes, which is arbitrary. I've put in a lot of arbitrary barriers, although twenty minutes is the length of a video tape, and so can be seen as a standard measure in performance art. There can be any number of these segments. This particular one has five. Each of these has the same basic material that is played with in different ways so that the meaning changes. What I'm interested in doing is taking some particular concerns and exploring the shifts of meaning in the visual and heard levels. I think probably what keeps me going all the way through with all my work is that it must have a strongly active relationship with the audience or the viewer. And I consider that a political necessity. I'm not making a consumer-based work that renders the audience passive. And that occurs a lot more in performance probably than in the more obviously consumer oriented practices like painting. I think most performance is reactionary in that regard. There is little room for debate. The artist is very much the hero in it, the audience squarely behind the cameras and what have you, trying to catch a glimpse of the valuable things going on.

In this piece I try to set up a foil or standard that continues no matter what occurs during the event. I've asked John Dunkley Smith to prepare a slide programme, and I have no idea what the images are, and I won't see them until a week before the performance. So that will be kind of interesting. Obviously I know something about what he'll do, but not the particular images. I have a structure for working with a number of actors and in the weeks before the performance we will meet to work through the huge number of possibilities that the structure can be played through. I will leave that as open to each of the actors as they can possibly stand. So they and I and the audience will have to seek together on how to make something of this. This keeps the performance really alive.

The reason I'm working with actors is that I wanted to take a particular activity or series of images — something a lot of people have done — a love story seen over a period of time. But I wanted to explore notions of Australian culture being dis-

parate. I wanted to look at the gaps. I wanted to make gaps where the whole thrust of Australian culture is to simplify and push together. So I've chosen a number of actors of different ages, sexual orientation, ethnic backgrounds, different cultural backgrounds. But I'm interested in using them not as actors where these things are hidden as they become someone else, I'm interested in them working from themselves and their backgrounds quite honestly. Nor am I interested in presenting the cliched love story, with the tall, dark beautiful man of slightly higher status than the woman, nor in presenting spyhole lookings at abnormal kinds of thing. I'm interested in trying to assert as normal a range of different possibilities between people of different cultural backgrounds as though they were not in fact noticeable, as in fact is the case in everyday life. And I'm hoping to stress its normality simply by repeating it so many times, in so many ways.

Eds: *So what will it look like? Can you tell us about one of the set-ups?*

LJ: OK. I have a script and it's a script for two actors, male and female, or two males, or two females. Let's assume the heterosexual one first. It's a simple story of a woman walking into a room, sitting down, and a man walks in. There's a sense of them having a past, they talk, flirt, become passionate. Then one withdraws slightly and a fight starts. That's the basic thing. Now that is interrupted, and there are many, many places where it can be interrupted, with a monologue. For instance the woman walking in can interrupt right away, and deliver her monologue, or she can wait until the long passionate scene. The monologue comes from a number of stories I've developed with the actors. They provided me with lots of stories, about their pasts or whatever, and I've written out about fifteen or so of them for them to choose from. So the woman could come out and address the audience right away, and put two or three of these stories together, and the other actor would only come on for the last five minutes of the segment. That's one way of interrupting, but either actor can interrupt at any time. Then there are two other actors who can also interrupt, again at any time. So the time represented can compress and expand.

Eds: *And this degree of openness to*



Lyndal Jones. *Profound Piece 8*, performance, June 1986.

chance can occur even on the night of the performance?

IJ: That depends. Some actors can't handle that degree of uncertainty. Others thrive on it. I thrive on it. Once the basics are really solid I'll be pushing them as hard as I can to open up and improvise, but not to cause insecurity. And it's possible to have it fully scripted for one actor, and left open for another. It could be so open that an actor could learn all the monologues and choose at any moment from any one of them. So who they are to the audience depends on the choice of monologues and the amount of the situation the audience is able to read.

Eds: *You were saying that the actors are of different backgrounds. Are they chosen as visual types, or are they chosen to fulfil a certain type of character?*

IJ: There is no character written, so the appearance of the actor gives as much clue to character as there is. If the actor is a twenty eight year old woman, then that is the character.

The actors were chosen for a number of reasons, the most important being that they were interested in making their own work, and that their work had addressed itself in some way to similar issues. I didn't want to just use people, I wanted to work with people whose concerns were sympathetic. Many of them have been my students either recently or in the past. For instance Kylie Belling, the young Aboriginal woman, was a student of mine last year and she has made a tape that is about addressing her white urban environment, and her insistence on having a place within that. And of course that's an awkward topic because of white Australia's continuing patronizing attitudes about the need for Aboriginals to remain living in the outback—there's little place for an Aboriginal who wants to live an urban life. So when you see pictures of a little girl in a white frilly frock sitting on a lawn being held by a white woman there is a resonance in the audience. And when she insists, holding the image or bringing out other souvenirs of her childhood, all urban, sophisticated, one might say 'white', we recognise clearly just how patronizing and untrue is the general insistence that the Aboriginals remain 'pure', stay native.

Lindy Lee

Eds: *Maybe we could start out by talking*

about your magazine, "On the Beach".

LL: We started out as a collective of five people. There were two English Lit type persons, a film theorist, Mark who is a filmmaker and a writer, and me. We really just started because there was no venue, no magazine dealing with the issues that we were interested in. Eventually three of them pulled out, leaving just Mark and me. Our interests were just too diverse and so there was a lot of fighting and eventually they just got fed up with it.

Eds: *When did you start?*


LL: 1983, and it was quite an interesting configuration of interests to begin with. We financed it ourselves, putting in \$200 each, which gave us enough to do the first issue. And then we were able to get funding from the Visual Arts Board to pay very basic costs. It's not a slick magazine. The issues ranged from French theory—translations and interviews with people like Baudrillard—to papers that were presented at various forums on Australian art, and we also got a lot of prose and poetry. Since then we've been deluged with submissions of so-called creative writing, but refuse to publish that anymore, most of it is just really, really boring. And we still get loads of it even though we haven't published any for ages.

Eds: *We can sympathize. We did one fiction issue, limited to artists' fiction mostly, and we still get stuff in the mail. We had to institute a no fiction policy after that.*

LL: I should tell you who the people involved were. There was Sam Mele, who is now teaching in Venice, and his thing was French theory and literature, stuff he was reading for his post graduate degree at that time. Mark Thirkell who is a fiction writer. Ross Gibson who is a filmmaker. And Mark Titmarsh who makes Super 8 films and paints and writes as well. And there's me.

Eds: *So tell us about your work.*

LL: My work. Ahh. The xerox work is based around the idea of the aura or presence of the original. It interested me how you could reproduce this detail of an old master painting using xerox and work on it in a way that it would still give



off a certain presence. Mostly I seem to work with pieces of El Greco, some Holbein, some Van Eyck, choosing specific images because I like them, and because they reproduce well. I'm interested in that paradox about originality, its rootedness. Because I don't really intervene in the process, I don't make the backgrounds any darker or anything. I just feed the copies into the machine a couple of extra times and the result is this spooky image, a ghost of art. So there is that emotive, intense result coming out of some very simple work with a machine. They are not all so simply produced—in some I do draw over the image or superimpose prints.

The other aspect of the work is these monochromatic paintings. They come about because I'm also interested in phenomenology and minimalism and things like that. I suppose I'm interested in intensity of colour and the symbolism that can be attached to monochromatic things. I've done a lot of black pieces, and a number of red ones. These colours seem to give out the most somehow. And then in works like the one in the Biennale in which a black monochrome painting is placed next to a small, very dark xerox image—I'm interested in the paradox between the intensity of the image and the ghostly nature of it, between the heavily textured black paint and the ephemeral quality of the photocopy. It



Lindy Lee: *Untitled (Portrait of Sir Thomas Le Strange)*, photocopy on Strathmore paper, 1985.

separates out the traditional questions of field and image, isolates different representations of presence and absence.

Since completing that series I've been working — very slowly because I tend to take a long time to work things out — on some other ideas going back to Merleau-Ponty's notion of Cezanne's doubt. Questions of vision and that sort of stuff, and I've actually started doing some landscape painting — actually going out into the landscape. It's a sort of corny Australian-ness mixed with a corny Cezannism that I hope will add up.

Richard Dunn

Eds: When we were talking to John (Dunkley-Smith) we discussed the idea of location, and how that operates as an issue in his work, but doesn't in the exhibition. Maybe you could talk about how your work has something to do with history, with time, and how that too leaves it vulnerable to misinterpretation in the exhibition.

RD: The problem with all these exhibitions is that they dislocate the work from any context and set up a new, artificial relationship between the work, and that this is quite often manufactured in quite specific ways. And so the question arises: how do you fit into this? I can manufacture a position to be in, but it doesn't mean anything because it has nothing to

do with the way the work locates itself. In the past I've been quite critical of work that cuts itself off from an exhibition, but I guess it is a strategy that works. The trouble with this exhibition is that so much of it seems arbitrary. There's a theme announced, but the thing is that that theme has really been what anyone wanted it to be. When it was being discussed it took on the outlines that the person listening wanted it to take on.

Eds: It does take on a certain importance however because the Sydney Biennale goes against the grain in announcing itself to be focused around a theme. Most biennales and art fests are simply made up of more or less interesting lists of more or less well known artists. So here was an exhibition presenting itself as thematically interested in questions about appropriation say, or originality, but which in many of its parts just looked like another more or less interesting selection of more or less well known artists, with a dash of Australians.

RD: But I never saw this exhibition in that idealistic way, as an exhibition that makes sense, because I could never figure out the relationship between the different categories. Nor could I figure out what the Beyond could possibly be. I came to varying conclusions at different times, one of which was that it was aimed

against the whole idea of appropriation. Now that is a concept I'm also critical of, that kind of wholesale stealing of images without any acknowledgement of context or function or purpose. That seems quite negative and I'm certainly opposed to it. I think one of the things suggested by the show is that there are a number of ways in which appropriation can be used and that is certainly something worth discussing. So to judge from the installation Nick saw my work, Tom Lawson's work, Komar & Melamid's work, and maybe one or two others as somehow beyond appropriation, and so maybe that's what "The Beyond" means. That's a sort of microcosm within the Biennale and I can see myself functioning within that if there was a distinction being made to different uses of reference to other images, pre-existing images.

Eds: So maybe we are just asking for too much. Maybe we should be content that that one suite of rooms that goes from the dreadful Dimitrijevic to the room in which we hang does stand as a fairly reasonable attempt to deal with the permutations of the idea of appropriation. And that we should simply look at the other sections as other sections, and not look for an overall thematic connection.

RD: That's how I see it. The pier is for the hippies, and the basement, well I don't

know what happens in the basement. It's where the Aboriginals are, but it is also where a lot of things that don't fit anywhere else are. So it seems to be a sort of lost realm. There may be some overall theme which pits one of these sections against another, but in the end it seems irrelevant because it doesn't really function that way in the exhibition. It's not clear that that is what is going on.

The exhibition, then, falls to pieces. And because it falls to pieces it can function in other sorts of ways, do other kinds of things. That is parts of it can simply separate off, and the part we're in does break off in this way and you can begin to see distinctions in the rooms. It's perhaps not clearly stated, but you can see distinctions that make sense.

Eds: *Do you want to talk about what some of the distinctions are?*

RD: Well I don't know what is going on in the first room.

Eds: *It seems to be about the comic book aspect of postmodernism, a kind of nervous laughter. Part of the same thing as having Glen Baxter on the cover of the catalogue. Having Masami Teraoka and Braco Dimitrijevic in the opening sequence of the show is a signal that it's OK folks, just kidding, this art stuff's not so difficult. Then Carlo Maria Mariani and Gerard Garouste are more like Classic Comics, easing us into the more serious stuff to come.*

RD: Then we enter the hall of meta discourse, the room of Tillers and David Salle. Work that talks about other work, work that talks about itself really. And I think there's a related question about market orientation with these works. They seem to be involved in an exploitation of various ideas centering around representation that is geared for success in the marketplace.

Eds: *Then there is a group of Australian artists—Tony Clark, Dick Watkins, Tim Johnson around the corner.*

RD: You can talk about each of these people in slightly different ways. Clark makes esoteric references to esoteric pieces of history. Tillers has done this to, in a way. There's a similarity between these two.

Eds: *Salle traffics in the esoteric too. His*

paintings exude an aura of insider privilege—you often have to have a particular type of information to know what the joke is.

RD: Yes, it's kind of academic. And I guess Johnson has that aspect too, with his Aboriginal references. It's especially clear with Clark where it's meant to appear as a kind of scholarship, and yet is obviously not that.

I think Dick Watkins was someone who started off following the modern masters, looking for a personal voice in an established style, but time has caught up with him and now his repeated failures can be renamed appropriation and seen as a critical intervention. Over the years he has made black and white Pollocks, some Rauschenbergs, a few Malevichs, and some Bridget Rileys in the Sixties. For a number of years now, maybe close to ten years, he has been working in a style derived from Forties abstraction, and he seems comfortable with that. I think he has perhaps found himself. I assume this is now an authentic style, though there are these quirky references which are comic, image jokes built into the abstract painting. That esoteric element once again.

The questions raised in the next room seem to me of a much more critical nature about representation itself, about originality, about notions of subjectivity. This is especially true of Sherrie Levine's work. I think in fact that her position as an artist was made quite clear in her "1917" show at Nature Morte in New York, and that that position underlined the poverty of most arttalk about image scavenging and so on. In that show she hung the Malevich pieces across from the Schiele's to demonstrate quite simply that her interest lies in operating between these works. She is not a pasticheur, but simply uses appropriation as one tactic in a larger strategy to identify her concerns with various kinds of desire. Indeed all the work in these last two rooms, Sherrie's, Tom's, Komar & Melamid's, mine, even Philip Taaffe's, operates with a much more complicated relation to the idea of reference and repetition. In these works you can see a variety of attempts to think historically and contextually. Of course the problem is that while that might be clear to us, the distinctions we might want to draw are not readily available to the ordinary viewer, and not made clear in the exhibition's accompanying texts.

Eds: *And there is also that odd distraction, the Malcolm McLaren shrine.*

RD: Who's only in it for the money. As you can tell by the desultory installation with its blow up of the notorious Bow-Wow album cover, a few press clippings about that notoriety, and a T-shirt. For which the Biennale paid out more in expenses and fees than for anything else. But while it all seems niggardly and peripheral to the concerns of the other artists, it probably is central to the theme of the show. In a way Malcolm McLaren represents The Beyond.

Eds: *He allows for a collapsing of differences for sensationalist rewards. His past involvement with the Sex Pistols aligns him with a certain type of deconstructivist idea associated with appropriation as a tactic, but his public statements in Sydney have been much more reminiscent of the opportunist transcendentalism of the late Sixties.*

RD: Which brings us back to the underlying theme of the exhibition, the validating of the transcendentalist position, a position which is most clearly articulated in the works on the pier—Joseph Beuys, Wolfgang Laib, Ken Unsworth and the rest. It's curious because at first it appeared as though the works down at the pier were framed, curatorially, in a much more positive way if one believed in the transcendental nature of the work being shown there.

Eds: *What we seem to be getting at is the idea that The Beyond represents an attempt at collapsing all kinds of critical differences, an assumption that art is either above it all, or just another branch of showbizness.*

RD: McLaren signifies exploitation. But in the placement of his work, his relics rather, he also signifies that appropriative work exploits images, exploits the past. And so all the work in the section we have been discussing can be collapsed into an exploitative model. McLaren in effect becomes the loathesome, public voice for the entire range of this work, sending any reasonable person to the pier and its quiet 'spirituality' for relief from crass commerce. That what McLaren says actually sounds more like the swaggering and boasting of the male modernists at the pier is easily lost in the shuffle of appearances. ◀

