

A MOLECULAR PERSPECTIVE

ON THE CONTEMPORARY AND THE GLOBAL

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Today it would seem that “the contemporary” and “the global” are not only indelibly and discursively entwined, but also largely thought to be synonymous—as art practices, curatorial methodologies and schools of theory expand to reflect the manner in which recent developments in technology, trade and communication have impacted on the way that human beings interact with one another. Yet to what extent does “the contemporary” gloss over the problems of and the idea of globalisation; and in turn, gloss over the problems of “the contemporary”? What does it mean to talk about Australian art in this way? The melding of globalisation’s infinite networks into the flat space of “the contemporary” brings with it still further problems. The internalisation of multiple and conflicting perspectives is a point of view that has, necessarily, imbibed at least the last three decades’ evolution to theories of postcolonialism and democracy. But this necessary imbrication of multiple perspectives, coupled with the sense of ours being an era defined by the end-of-grand narratives, has produced a negative set of criteria of judgement for contemporary art, seemingly advocating an endlessly pluralised, open-ended vista in the place of even a semi-opaque definition. While it is impossible to extricate the condition of contemporaneity from the connective processes of globalisation and the expansionism of a neoliberal economy, in the same way that modernism cannot be disentangled from the impact of major technological, industrial and political shifts, the answer is not simply a matter of more rhizomes. That is to say, there is space for a definitive methodological structure with a beginning and an end point—contra Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s conception of rhizomatic knowledge, whose infinite nodal points are able to be limitlessly interlinked with one another and expanded into ever-new categories.¹

Perhaps a good place to start then, would be to structurally delimit the field of vision: from the scope of an infinity of fractals to an enclosed and dialectical construction of the macro and the micro that might help to describe the ineluctable dualism of contemporaneity. In a sense, this method would give spatial (or at least perspectival) form to Terry Smith’s time-oriented model of “the contemporary” as proposed in *What is Contemporary Art?* (2009), one of the most sustained and intelligent attempts to tackle this question that emphasises the existence of co-temporalities, without relinquishing a discrete framework of critique. Smith articulates the need for a clearly delineated set of criteria against which contemporary art might be judged; if not strictly for art’s sake, then at least as a way of giving meaning to the burgeoning institutionalisation of the ‘contemporary movement’—in art schools, academia, museums and so on. His book presents a very good answer to the question posed by its title: not only by proffering specific geographical and historical taxonomies, but also a fundamentally structural method for dealing with “the contemporary”.

Smith teases out the entwining of the global (the geographical) and the contemporary (the temporal) by taking them as two different lenses through which to view contemporary art. But what is most significant and original in Smith’s work is his use of structure: his implicit assertion that what is needed to properly talk about contemporary art is a structure, a methodology. At its core, Smith’s book posits that to deal with “contemporary art” is to deal with the “world’s art”, in all its diversity.² If contemporary art is so drastically diffused across the globe (as it is increasingly beginning to look like a 1:1 model of the planet with biennales for every city), then to find a way to talk about it is to find a way to talk about the world. In this case, any discursive methodology proposed must be non-hierarchical without being blind to the inequalities and imbalances that punctuate the globalised terrain.

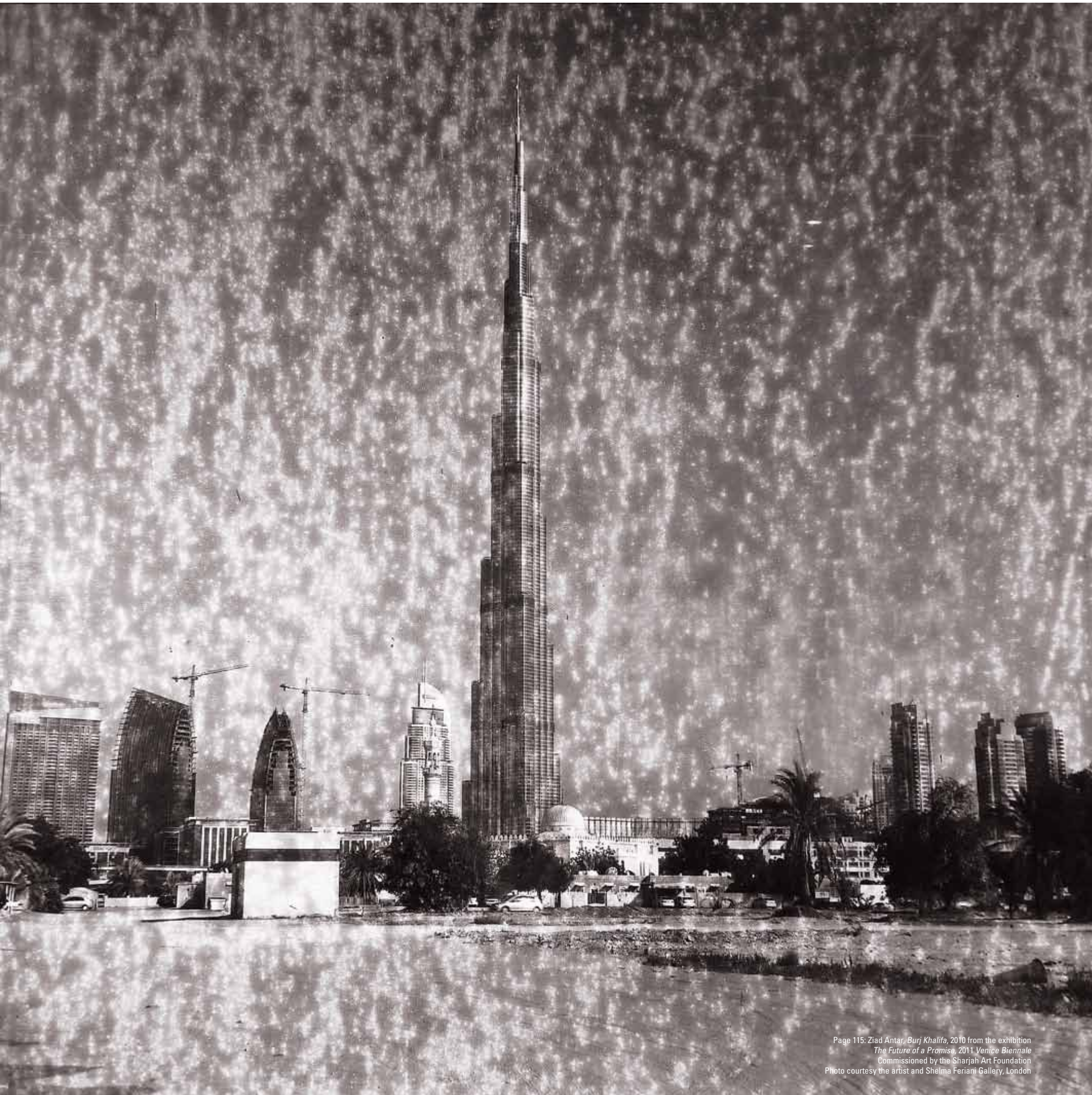
In order to explore the questions of what constitutes “contemporary art”, what is its relationship to globalised geography and history, and to assess what Australian art is actually achieving in the ‘bigger picture’ of the global contemporary art-scape, then we might do what contemporary art seems to do best: cannibalise a methodological structure from a sibling discipline in the absence of possessing one of its own. In this case, the molecular-scalar model illustrated in Charles and Ray Eames’ 1968 documentary *Powers of Ten*—“a film dealing with the relative size of things in the universe and the effect of adding another zero”—fits well.³

Beginning with an overhead shot of a couple enjoying a picnic next to Lake Shore in Chicago, *Powers of Ten* is a nine-minute long study of the scale and atomic structure of the universe. Firstly, the film expands outwards from a one metre square perspective of the couple towards, and eventually beyond, the stars in spatial increments determined by powers of ten. It begins with a one metre square area, then every ten seconds expands by ten times the previous size: so one metre square turns into ten metres square, then 100 metres and so on. The gaze finally reaches 10^{24} metres, 100 million light years away from where it began, or roughly the size of the observable universe. At this point, it begins to zoom backwards, tracing its journey in decreasing powers of ten to its starting point: the square metre encasing the couple at Lake Shore. Upon reaching this target, the camera begins to focus inwards on the man’s hand. The camera ‘penetrates’ the skin of the hand at 10^{-4} metres, before passing through its collagen, then a layer of capillaries, to the coils of DNA within a cell wall. Then, at 10^{-8} metres, it approaches the atomic scale, eventually examining with the utmost detail a proton in the nucleus of a carbon atom at 10^{-16} metres. At 10^{-13} metres, we enter the “domain of universal modules”. The narrator notes, “there are protons and neutrons in every nucleus, electrons in every atom, atoms bonded into every molecule out to the farthest galaxy”, and so we as viewers are reminded of our own scalar bond to the earth, stars and space via our comparative atomic structures.

In my experience, this short film polarises viewers into two categories: those who are existentially horrified by the miniscule human scale at 10^{24} metres, and those who are relieved by it. In either category, however, *Powers of Ten* promotes a method of thinking about the atomic and the universal—and, by extension, the local and the global—as indelibly in tandem. Like an omnipresent Damoclean sword, the impending catastrophe that is climate change looms over the heads of all global citizens today. It is part of what has rendered urgent the maxim “Think Global, Act Local” in the twenty-first century, and has inspired new, ultra-long term ways of thinking in the minds of the global populace, characterised by such projects as *The Clock of the Long Now*.⁴ If contemporaneity were to have a voice, it could be heard echoing in the way that politics, science and industry has each recently been forced to think on a grand macro scale due to the nascent threat of global warming.

In 2010, the English Philosophical Research and Development journal *Collapse* published an interdisciplinary volume on the topic of “how the philosophical enterprise of thinking ‘the whole’ has been, and continues to be, determined by our belonging to the Earth”.⁵ Specifically, the volume considered the eclipsing of the globalisation paradigm by the ecological paradigm, coupled with the shift in thinking away from the notion that humans occupy a central (or even merely hierarchical) place within the universe, a school of thought characteristic to the philosophical movement of Speculative Realism with which the journal is closely tied. The editor Robin Mackay writes: “The contemporary ecological crisis demands a (somewhat more modest) reframing of the task of conceiving systematically the ‘All’ of nature—the biosphere within which human beings are increasingly aware of their implication.”⁶ Ecological crisis, therefore, has forced humans on the micro level and politics and industry on the macro level to internalise an appropriately dualistic method of thinking through responsibility. From this perspective, the formalisation of “the contemporary” is not explicitly defined by the globalisation movement, though it has obviously been shaped by it, but rather by this ability to think immanently—and, more broadly, to exist immanently—in two states at all times: in both universal and atomic terms; the global and the local; in theory and in practice. Precipitated by such crises, “the contemporary”, then, is characterised by its ability to think in dualisms: to simultaneously reconcile the vastness of geological life with the tremendous force that our comparatively meagre human existence has impacted upon the Earth.

That the global populace in its entirety has been triggered by the threat of climate change to engage with an ultra-long term vision is, by and large, wishful thinking. This is so in part because of the typically ultra-short life cycles of most governments, from the Local to Federal to multilateral, that largely preclude the implementation of any meaningful policies with regard to reversing the damage already done to the environment. More skeptically, we only need to add the



Page 115: Ziad Antar, *Burj Khalifa*, 2010 from the exhibition
The Future of a Promise, 2011 Venice Biennale
Commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation
Photo courtesy the artist and Shelma Feriani Gallery, London



“global-“ prefix to another crisis, the financial crisis of the last decade, to get a better understanding of just what in fact prompts government, industry and the general populace to shift their thinking from the micro to the macro. Whether stemming from ecological altruism or individual greed, however, that shift is there.

Expanding outwards in concentric squares, so to speak, this zoom framework based on *Powers of Ten* is useful for visualising a suitably non-hierarchical, three-dimensional, vertical map of the world in which there is no central point—only parallel strands, as opposed to a two-dimensional, lateral or horizontal map in which East and West, centre and periphery are constantly compared and contrasted, thus reinscribing their increasingly irrelevant binary differences. While thinking of geography as a longitudinal, three-dimensional terrain does not eradicate the privileged distinctions that exist between disparate locations, it does at least remove them from the methodology of viewing, thus making the distinctions more pronounced when they do occur. Infinite axial planes of thought are possible within this framework, yet its definite binary nature lends it a structural integrity required by any form of qualitative judgement. The methodology of telescoping only answers one half of the contemporaneity question, in that it does not remedy the apparent lack of criteria for judgement, but it does provide scope for ethico-political orientation within a broader economy of scale.

So, how might Australia fit into such a world vision? After all, an East-West model of geography has never really applied to this decisively isolated southern continent. Moreover, to what extent have theories of contemporaneity resolved or done away with Smith’s now canonical “provincialism problem”? (Indeed, what does the ‘Provincialism Problem’—penned at roughly the beginning of the modern globalisation movement as a spatial argument concerned with geopolitics, whereas the recent *What Is Contemporary Art?* is a more temporal, historiographically-inclined study—actually reflect?) These questions fit into a longer lineage of queries spanning from Smith in the 1970s to figures like Paul Taylor and Immants Tillers in the 1980s, which themselves stem from the apparently national disposition of thinking inherently of Australia or Australianness as a ‘problem’ to be overcome, either by distance or by discourse.

Naturally, this macro/micro framework of the zoom encourages one to think about Australian art in varying scalar contexts and the ways in which it is dialectically entwined with broader issues at each level. Beginning with Australian art as a discrete field, one’s range of vision might expand outwards to encompass it as engaging with basic geopolitics; then with the concept of heterochrony; to the way that local and international societies interact with contemporary art; and, at the outer most edge, perhaps the way that images connect with culture—or ‘iconology’. But by expanding outwards using the telescoping methodology to consider, say, the way that international curators appropriate contemporary Australian art, we see that rather than promoting an even-handed cross-section of the breadth of contemporary Australian artistic output, Australian participation in international biennales, triennales and *documentas* demonstrates a regurgitative, box-ticking list of already-‘global’ practitioners largely determined by the national pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* (Rosemary Laing, Ricky Swallow, Tracey Moffat, Shaun Gladwell etc.). Speaking of Nicolas Bourriaud’s 2009 *Tate Triennial*, *Altermodern*, which included work by the London-based Australian artist David Noonan, Smith put it best when he wrote that the French curator merely “updated his emphasis on this kind of participatory art to include its practitioners who are active outside the centers of Europe and the United States”.⁷ In this sense, the ‘Provincialism Problem’ has not so much been resolved as relocated: dispersed within a newly decentralised understanding of the peripheral. The new global periphery is subject to major power imbalances too, but the associated question of nationalism has been severely complicated by the 1:1 map of art and the world, if not rendered entirely irrelevant.

The area in which the macro/micro zoom methodology most clearly highlights these types of global power imbalances is the field of economics, with which it bears an obvious vernacular relationship. Indeed, it is within the economic landscape that the most violent discrepancies between the two (the macro and the micro) have presented themselves during the course of globalisation. The practice of the Melbourne-based artist Nicholas Mangan often directly confronts the dynamics of such discrepancies in the politics of global power, drawing out the tensions through elegant sculptural and cinematic gestures. His recent project *Nauru, Notes from a Cretaceous World* (2010) explicitly addressed the violent impact that the introduction of a neoliberal (macro) market economy had on the local (micro) economy of Nauru, an island in the South Pacific that endured ruinous levels of phosphate mining during the last century and, for the majority of the last decade, was used by Australia as a repository for detaining and processing its illegal immigrants as part of the Howard Government’s ‘Pacific Solution’ scheme.

The two major components of *Nauru, Notes from a Cretaceous World* were an eponymous fifteen-minute looped video comprising field footage of various locations around Nauru taken by Mangan during his two visits, and a series of crater-surfaced coffee tables (titled *Dowiyogo’s ancient coffee coral table*) fashioned from polished cross-sections of Nauruan rock, a once phosphate-rich but now largely barren mineral source. The basic materiality of the latter series of coffee tables tells a poignant tale of molecular interrelationships and the way solids morph over time. The Nauruan rock used by Mangan literally evolved from marine guano that washed-up on the atoll during earlier eustatic cycles (when Nauru was submerged), then built-up, decomposed and subsequently covered with a layer of topsoil and baked under the equatorial sun, thus forming the phosphate-rich sedimentary limestone pinnacles that would become the site of Nauru’s one-time economic prosperity. This process occurred over a period of several million years (the pinnacles contain fossils dating back as far as the early-Miocene period, five to ten million years ago). In a quixotic narrative gesture characteristic of the artist, and hinging upon his fascination with the discipline of archaeology as a trope, Mangan’s elegiac film and the accompanying coffee tables contrasted this ancient geological history with the comparatively miniature human occupation of the landscape between the period of 1907 and 2000, when the mining began and when the phosphate ore levels became depleted.

Woven into this broad history are a further series of micro-narratives that elucidate an individual human experience of Nauru. The three coffee tables comprising *Nauru, Notes from a Cretaceous World* were not merely carved from genuine Nauruan rock, but from the three pinnacles that stood custodian-like by the entry to Nauru House in Melbourne, functioning as defiant pillars or monuments to the fleeting affluence of the small Pacific nation. The resonance of their being turned into coffee tables pivots around the late-Nauruan President Bernard Dowiyogo’s suggestion to a CDNN reporter that slicing, polishing and then constructing coffee tables from the mined-out pinnacles might be one way for Nauru to reinvigorate its waning economy.⁸ (The country is now conducting feasibility reports on the export of its coral rock in the form of tiles for masonry flooring.) To expand out from the original pinnacles, the molecular evolution of the sedimentary rock metaphorically echoes the socio-political development of Nauru during the 1900s and onwards: from a lush and self-sustainable atoll, to a financially and environmentally gutted landscape. (In fact, the telescoping framework connects with Mangan’s project in an interesting way because before visiting Nauru for the first time, the artist speaks of obsessively zooming-in and out of its variously pixelated contours on Google Earth.)

In many ways, Nauru was forced into complying with the Australian Government's offer to function as an offshore refugee processing site due to its destitute financial and environmental state—since up until this point (2001), the categories were so interdependent that they virtually formed just one. By explicitly engaging with the international economic history by which Australia paid Nauru to house and process many of its refugees, symbolically referenced in the film by footage of a distressed bird attempting to escape the wooden struts to which it is shackled, Mangan engages with one of the most contested and condemnatory issues at the heart of Australian politics today: the country's stance on refugees.⁹ This political issue presents to the globalised world an image of Australia defined by that which it excludes or makes invisible. If we are to understand the 'Provincialism Problem' as newly dispersed within a decentralised framework of the peripheral, then this highly problematic dynamic of visibility and invisibility must be transposed to a definition of contemporaneity as well.

How can contemporary art confront and defend itself against a more insidious and aborescent form of exclusion, typified by the way that the spread of a neoliberal economy compromised the smaller microcosm of Nauru and eventually facilitated the (partial) rendering invisible of refugees en route to Australia? And what is the responsibility of "the contemporary" to highlight these issues against the utopian imperatives of globalisation? To consider these questions, we can turn to a short essay by Esther Gabara titled 'Perspectives on Scale: From the Atomic to the Universal', which is a reluctant and somewhat wary attempt to grapple with the question of globalisation and its ramifications for the contemporary art world by focusing on a tiny sculpture by the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles titled *Cruzeiro do sul* (1969-70). *Cruzeiro do sul* is a 9 x 9 x 9 millimetre (roughly the size of a fingertip) wooden cube, made half of pine and half of oak. A conceptual piece, Meireles stipulates that the work must be exhibited by itself in a space that is at least 200 metres square (roughly the size of a standard white cube art gallery). The viewer's relationship to the miniscule sculpture is thus regulated by whether or not they can see it from their particular vantage in the otherwise empty space, and whether or not they are culturally privy to the symbolism of the fact that when oak and pine are rubbed together they create fire and were therefore sacred to the Tupi people of Brazil.¹⁰ That is to say, this relationship between viewer and artwork is governed by visibility and legibility.

Gabara argues that Meireles' sculpture speaks of the violence of globalisation without falling into the trap that, for instance, has prominent commentator James Elkins, that is "the art market's desire both for markers of local identity and for visual art [to be] legible without translation".¹¹ By demonstrating on two levels (empirical and symbolic) that cultural heterogeneity is not visible to all eyes and, further, by refusing to let the work enter the art market (Meireles has always kept it in his possession), *Cruzeiro do sul* sidesteps this trap and highlights the antagonism inherent in many attempts to culturally contextualise an artwork in a globalised topography. This antagonism or violence surfaces in the interplay between visibility and invisibility, and legibility with illegibility, and it affects everything touched by globalisation—from the atomic to the universal. On this point it is worth noting that *Cruzeiro do sul* is Portuguese for 'Southern Cross'—the constellation of stars that is viewable only from the Southern Hemisphere and which is, of course, represented on the Australian flag.

To think about contemporary art is always a manifold process, split into at least two parallel strands that will never fully converge but remain permanently locked in conversation with one another: between the local and the global, the atomic and the universal. If the contemporary (a temporal or historical argument) is deeply tied up with the global and globalisation (a geographical point), then what is needed is a way of talking about this entanglement without occluding or skimming over the complexities of either category. The remedy, as Smith has recognised, can be found in structure. What the zoom method gleaned from the Eames' film proffers is a way to consider multiple structures as part of a continuum, one of different structures of reality, none of which are any more important or 'real' than any other. In this sense, the structure of the local, the Australian, becomes relevant again: but not as an isolated vantage point from which we look longingly towards New York or Paris (the 'Provincialism Problem'), but as just one level of structure, one level of the zoom embedded in many others. This, it would seem, is already how contemporary artists—from Mangan to Meireles—are making art. If locality has failed and the "provincialism problem" dispersed, then it is the role of art and of art criticism to think in such non-hierarchical, multi-axial and infinitely scalar terms, and to highlight the slippages between that which is and that which ought to be. To think in these terms is not only symptomatic, but the responsibility of the condition of contemporaneity—and its resonances can be felt both up and down the chain.



Notes

This essay was developed from an extended series of conversations with my friend and colleague, Nick Croggon

¹ See, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, London: New York: Continuum, 2004

² The effective forthcoming reissuing of *What Is Contemporary Art?*, Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009, as *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, London: Laurence King; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011 further implies a suggested continuity between the two: the contemporary and the global, or the contemporary and the 'world'

³ Ray and Charles Eames, *Powers of Ten*, 1968, 9 minutes, distributed by IBM

⁴ *The Clock of the Long Now* is a project organised by the Long Now Foundation to encourage long-term thinking to encourage responsibility for a 10,000 year period of time, rather than a generational or governmental period of time. See: <http://longnow.org/>

⁵ Robin Mackay, 'Editorial Introduction', *Collapse VI*, 2010: 3

⁶ *ibid*: 6

⁷ Terry Smith, *Art Bulletin* Vol XCII No 4, 2010: 377

⁸ Jack Hitt, 'Nauru: Island of the Damned', Cyber Digital News Network, <http://www.cdnn.info/news/article/a090608.html>; accessed 7 June 2011

⁹ The description of the bird as symbolic of refugees detained off-shore as part of the 'Pacific Solution' scheme belongs to Shelley McSpedden, author of the excellent scholarly text comprising *Nicholas Mangan: Notes From A Cretaceous World*, Melbourne: The Narrows in association with Sutton Gallery, 2010

¹⁰ Esther Gabara, 'Perspectives on Scale: From the Atomic to the Universal', in James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska and Alice Kim (eds), *Art and Globalization*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010: 202

¹¹ *ibid*: 202-203