



# 2004: AUSTRALIAN ANXIETIES

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For a number of years Australian public galleries have struggled to keep up with the range of cultural activities that have been proliferating in studios across the country. To accommodate new media in particular, large amounts of money have been spent on acquiring appropriate hardware for the display of video, film and networked media, as well as the appropriate technical staff to run and maintain it. Curators of contemporary art have had to add expansive new areas of practice such as cinema and web art to their orbit of knowledge. The inaugural collaboration

between the National Gallery of Victoria and its new neighbour, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, was therefore a timely and significant event. The result, *2004: Australian Culture Now*, was an exciting array of styles, media, artists and concerns that provided a complex picture of contemporary Australian creativity.

Publicity for the exhibition heralded 'an unprecedented landmark national survey of the work at the edge of current artistic practice.' Lofty ambitions were also revealed by the exhibition's somewhat grand subtitle, *Australian Culture Now*. While not all the work

in the show could comfortably have been described as 'at the edge of current artistic practice' [John Wolseley's long-standing investigation into landscape for example, or the figurative allegorical painting of Rod Moss], *2004* was an impressive and dynamic national survey and hopefully a welcome regular addition to the Australian art calendar. Refreshingly, the project's resources appeared to match the scope of its ambition: eleven curators from the NGVA and ACMI mapped out the exhibition over two years, finally selecting no fewer than one hundred and thirty artists whose work was generously displayed in both venues [plus some twenty artists whose work appeared online].

Laden with the weight of responsibility created both by its title and its ambitions, *2004* could well have disappointed. A dull non-event with too many mediocre works and attendant bad press would have been felt acutely by the artists involved and the visual arts sector and shunned by the public at large. This was something that contemporary art in Australia, with its constant search for new audiences and greater media attention desperately didn't need. Thankfully however, the exhibition was critically well received for the most part and audience numbers exceeded both institutions' expectations.

Such exhibitions provide useful insights into a culture both at the time of their display and retrospectively. What better way for example, to trace developments in Australian art of the 1990s than to turn to some of the catalogues of *Australian Perspecta* or the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*? Over the last decade both biennial exhibitions varied in the degree to which they were thematically driven and such themes when they existed ranged from broad media categories [for example sculpture in the 1991 *Perspecta* and photographic media in this year's *Adelaide Biennial*] to tighter conceptual groupings [such as art and nature in *Perspecta* 1997]. One of the best *Adelaide Biennials* focused on indigenous art, a response to an area of Australian culture that by 2000 had become particularly dynamic and was rapidly evolving.<sup>1</sup> The ability of these exhibitions to take a flexible and responsive approach to defining contemporary Australian culture has contributed to their strength, although in *Perspecta's* case it was not a feature that could save it from extinction [the exhibition folded in 1999].

While the ACMI display focused on a range of new media works, considered by Anthony Gardner in the following text, *2004's* largest component covered the entire third floor of the NGV's Ian Potter Centre, a space that has never looked so good. In fact so good that *The Australian's* reviewer, Ted Colless, cheekily questioned whether the works were simply

examples of good décor.<sup>2</sup> *2004* was a challenging exhibition to hang due to its infinite diversity. The temptation, understandably, was to bring some sense of coherence to the selection by allowing aesthetic judgement to control placement. This strategy worked well in most instances and allowed jewellery [Mascha Moje] for example, to take its place comfortably alongside large-scale Aboriginal sculpture [Lena Yarinkura], a spectacular installation involving a chandelier slowly being encased in ice [Nicholas Folland] and an intimate series of digital images covered with carved paraffin wax [Catherine Truman]. This particular room not only looked good but also created some interesting if unexpected connections between apparently disparate works. This is exactly what such a survey of Australian culture should do and it is just such connections that elevate an exhibition above the lowly status of décor. It was often surprising just how good such varied work looked together and this was a credit to the curators, who not only selected works that were independently strong but who also hung the show to its best advantage. The other strength of the hang was the generosity of space it afforded individual artists. At its worst however, the tendency towards aestheticisation resulted occasionally in the grouping of works that were too similar. The lack of predominant colour in paintings by Paddy Bedford and Marie Hagerty, and sculpture by Nick Mangan, appeared to be the primary rationale for their close proximity in one gallery, a factor that only detracted from these otherwise strong works.

Some galleries contained works that sat almost too comfortably in their surroundings. In particular a large wooden assemblage by Damiano Bertolli, *Continuous Moment* [2003-04], unwittingly appeared in scale and angularity to mirror the interior design. Architect Peter Davidson, who was so closely and controversially involved with the first hang at the NGVA, would surely have approved of this particular curatorial effort. As a general observation, large sculptures were often shown to advantage in certain corners where distracting geometric architectural features would otherwise visually compete with two-dimensional works. This is gallery architecture that makes more than the usual demands on its curators, so it is good to see such challenges being met so well.

What did *2004* at the NGVA reveal about Australian culture now? That it comes in many diverse forms including fashion [which so rarely makes it into such surveys], craft [another interloper] and new media, all of which were drawn together surprisingly well. That globalisation rules [with significant exceptions such as indigenous work and Scott Redford, whose Gold Coast parodies reveal a strong sense of regional identity]. That in light of

recent world events there is surprisingly little overt interest in national or international politics [Richard Bell being one notable exception]. Painting and sculpture by indigenous artists continues to be outstanding and varied. Culture in the 'regions' [that is, outside Melbourne and Sydney] is alive and kicking [places of execution would have been a useful addition to the labels]. Photography is not as dominant as one would have expected and good printmaking hard to find, while painting continues to reinvent itself with vigour. Beauty is no longer a dirty word, although it often comes dripping with irony. While only time will tell just how accurately this exhibition reflected Australian contemporary culture, it is this type of broad survey that can best identify the flavour of a culture in any given period.

Notably, the organisers of *2004* made a conscious decision to include both emerging and well-established artists. While the two groups tend to operate in separate exhibiting and funding spheres, the established artists provided ballast for the work of their less experienced peers. *2004* was an attempt to counter the common criticism that mid-career artists lack professional opportunities in Australia, and some interesting inter-generational dialogues were established. Compare for example John Barbour's poignant embroidered texts [*Untitled Object* 1–5, 2002–04], his best work to date, with the pathos of James Lynch's animated figures [there are four differently titled DVDs, 2003].

The demise of Sydney's *Perspecta* was only one factor that encouraged the NGV to create its own Australian survey. Melbourne has long lacked a regular major survey exhibition of either Australian or international art. The arrival in 1999 of the *Melbourne International Biennial* was an attempt to rectify this deficiency. "It shows once again", wrote the Lord Mayor of the day in his introduction to the catalogue, "how the arts help to define Melbourne's personality reflecting what is unique about the city and its people... The *Biennial* will become central to the City's contemporary visual arts sector..."<sup>3</sup> Sadly this was not to be the case and despite attracting considerable praise for curator Juliana Engberg, the *Melbourne International Biennial* was poorly managed financially and as a result disappeared from the arts calendar. This very public failure is still fresh in the minds of Melbourne's artworld and the organisers of *2004* carefully avoided publicly committing to further exhibitions in the future, although they are hopeful that a three year turn-around will be feasible.

Melbourne's realisation of an Australian survey coincided with the building of a new and self-consciously contemporary building

at Federation Square for the exclusive display of Australian art. The confusingly titled Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia is now promoted as being at the cutting-edge of Melbourne's [and Australia's] cultural life. With its LCD and multi-media information panels, pixelated house font and of course its showy contemporary interiors, the building projects a very different image to its more stately elder sister, NGV International. *2004: Australian Culture Now* well suited this new contemporary public image and looked dynamic in its surroundings – the only drawback being its display necessitated the temporary removal of the Gallery's own contemporary Australian collection.

While the idea of institutional collaboration was a great one, the reality of the NGVA/ACMI example was marred by teething problems. Due to the tight media focus at ACMI there was little that united the two exhibitions. In addition, the respective displays ended three weeks apart which effectively meant that only a portion of *2004* was on show for that final period. While the ACMI component was strong enough to stand on its own merits, the fact that it had to make nonsense of the exhibition's subtitle. It also compromised the usefulness of the catalogue, with its comprehensive exhibition checklist and artists biographies and statements.

Such gripes aside, *2004* stood up to its claims of being a landmark national survey exhibition. Making a strong case for the irrelevance of media categories it embraced a wide gamut of cultural activities. It took the easy option by abandoning the word 'art' altogether, sending a large team of curators into their respective cultural fields to see what they could 'bring in from the cold'. While curatorial committees tend to smother good exhibitions with endless compromises and a diminished sense of accountability, *2004* managed on the whole to avoid such pitfalls. The stage has now been set for a serious new player in the visual art calendar.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Curated by Brenda Croft, *Beyond the Pale* incorporated a variety of media and styles from around the country and succeeded in its aim of questioning widely held yet restrictive views of what constitutes Aboriginal art

<sup>2</sup> Edward Colless, 'Present Tense', *The Weekend Australian*, 17–18 July 2004: 18–19

<sup>3</sup> The Right Honourable Cr Peter Costigan, 'A Message', *Signs of Life: Melbourne International Biennial*, Melbourne, 1999: 6

Opposite: Jan Nelson, [foreground] *Walking in Tall Grass* [*Blackwood*], 2004  
[background] *Spring Collection*, 2004  
Photo courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne  
Above: Guy Benfield in collaboration with Vittoria di Stefano, *The essence of ju ju* [video still], 2003  
Photo courtesy the artist  
Following pages: Left: Marcus Lyall, *Slow Service* [video still], 2003  
Photo courtesy the artist  
Right: The Kingpins, *Dark Side of the Mall*, 2004  
Photo courtesy the artists



## ANTHONY GARDNER

It's become something of an artworld axiom to see *2004: Australian Culture Now* as Melbourne's new biennial on the Australian art circuit. The signs are implicit throughout the *2004* catalogue, with its pitch to exhibit Australian works made in the two-year period since 2002.<sup>1</sup> The curators' focus on locally based [and especially] emergent artists and collectives suggests a timely [and contemporaneous] counter-punch to the international imprimatur and increased vapidness of the *Biennale of Sydney*. And the art scribe elites can sharpen their pencils and their tongues on the journey between the increasingly criticised narrowness of the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* and the broad, one hundred and thirty artist leviathan of *2004*.<sup>2</sup> At least Victoria Lynn, Director of Creative Development at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image [ACMI], let loose this most open of secrets in her online brief for the show, promoting this 'large scale survey' as an extension of the 'regular survey exhibitions of Australian art' in the recent past.<sup>3</sup>

So what *2004* essentially promises to be is a revision of the major Australian art survey that was Sydney's *Perspecta*, albeit updated through the art equivalent of the Witness Protection Program following *Perspecta's* demise in 1999: different name, different home, but the same basis of charting the diversity and the developing art historical conditions of

contemporary Australian practice. On this ground alone, *2004* deserves recognition as a potential watershed event, a vital intervention into the generally abysmal commitment to contemporary Australian art [and art criticism] shown by this country's art institutions.

However, perceiving *2004* as simply a restaging of *Perspecta* is not entirely accurate. One significant shift is the dominance of new media, video and net.art works, an acknowledgement of the ascendance, if not the ubiquity, of these media in contemporary Australian and global art practice.<sup>4</sup> The ACMI component provides three primary evaluations: of the effects of these media on recent non-digital works presented at the National Gallery of Victoria: Australia; and more importantly of the dominant tropes and themes explored through these media as discrete practices, and of the Australian cultural contexts and conditions under which they are made and displayed. ACMI manages to provide a fairly comprehensive survey of these latter concerns, despite their potential inexhaustibility – from the immersive capacities of these media [especially their potential to isolate audiences from social 'reality' within hyperreal, escapist ambiances], to experimentation with new media's formal limits so as to perceive content anew – from the broadcasting of self-documentation through blogs, to the complicity of these media in saturating domestic, public and virtual environments with information, entertainment and advertising.