

# THE ABSENT CENTRE OF GLOBAL ART

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Charles Merewether, the director of the 2006 *Biennale of Sydney*, has refused the notion that any simple overarching theme underlies the exhibition's title *Zones of Contact*. He suggests rather that the 'zones of contact' in question relate broadly to the many, varied and unpredictable transnational trajectories and global interstices that shape contemporary art practice today. The intersections of these increasingly encourage contact between diverse and dissimilar cultures and highlight the challenges facing contemporary artists working under globalising and often trying conditions. Nevertheless, Merewether has also denied that the 2006 *Biennale of Sydney* is an exhibition overtly about 'globalisation'. Still, *Zones of Contact* obviously touches on many of globalisation's major themes or 'symptoms', like acerbated capitalist competition, accelerated displacement, radical alteration to traditional concepts of the State and the destruction of the environment. Through engaging these contemporary socio-political phenomena, *Zones of Contact* also more broadly addresses related changes to cultural perceptions of a global 'centre' and its peripheries.

Obviously in an Australian context, issues of marginality are highly loaded given the country's long-held identity as antipodean and ultimately far removed from major cultural developments. Such conventional, colonialist perceptions of Australia's socio-cultural situation are by now, long held to be obsolete, having been transcended through access to new technologies and increased trading opportunities. The country's contemporary mediated identity is therefore distinguished both by repeated symbolic displays of nationalist self-confidence, and constant reiteration of the indisputable nation-building value of a robust economy. Combined, these enable Australia to forge stronger ties and exert greater influence, not only in the greater Asia-Pacific region but globally. However, such dominant, positivist self-representations of Australia's present cultural confidence under conditions of economic prosperity, ultimately conceal yet another of globalisation's primary symptoms, that is, its large-scale reinvigoration of colonial discourse and practices.

In today's globalised and globalising, postcolonial era, activities and attitudes that are basically colonialist occur with ever increasing frequency, as economic globalisation continues to dramatically widen the gulf separating rich and poor, 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Thus, in our contemporary global age, in which the realities of colonialism are widely believed overcome and superseded, its power structures actually begin to forcefully re-emerge. Not surprisingly, evidence of colonialist or neo-colonialist discourse appears in contemporary global art and culture just as often and as forcefully. Here as elsewhere, the reappearance of colonialist power relations is actually possible through multiple conscious and unconscious acts of concealment. Disguised in these is the very idea of the existence of a contemporary global power centre. Indeed, much pro-globalisation discourse proposes that the hybrid-cultures it promotes actually disallow recourse to a dominant hegemonic model. Related arguments in support of globalisation processes further claim that with this apparent disappearance of a dominant hegemonic centre, rigid hierarchies also vanish or at least diminish considerably. The disappearance of a dominant centre, this position argues, makes way instead for multiple collective endeavors capable of supporting maximum cultural difference. This means furthermore that 'other', usually non-Western cultures, are now finally capable of being experienced as equals, rather than simply as distant and exotic. From this point of view, globalisation embraces difference, while bringing manifold cultures nearer to one another.

Such a scenario though is a fantasy and one especially potent in nations like our own, not beset by the obvious grinding structural violence wreaked by such phenomena as military occupation and widespread poverty. Alternatively, for those occupied or displaced, the centre will always represent the power of the oppressor and of the specific nation or nations with which it identifies such power. The *imperium* of the contemporary USA is perhaps the most obvious example of such a reinvigorated centre, particularly since its attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq—the latter subjected to massive, violent destabilisation and by now all but destroyed. Of course, allied to the USA in the perpetration of such acts of aggression are other Western countries like the UK and Australia, as well as numerous other nations scattered around the world. The global dispersal of power this situation indicates, certainly denies the USA ultimate centrality or culpability in world affairs. In any case, the USA's apparent global centrality is just as much simulated and doubly precarious for this fact; its very instability is the

obverse of its blatant displays of power. Nonetheless, just because globalisation processes have redistributed contemporary sites of power does not mean that a centre cannot successfully coalesce. Rather and seemingly paradoxically, the centre now exists at multiple dispersed points. In the end, what unites such global power-spots is their adherence, as well as their technological and infrastructural capacity, to uphold principles of neo-liberal economics that drive globalisation. Purveyed by its supporters as the natural form societies take, once 'false' opposition like that of international Left politics has collapsed,<sup>1</sup> neo-liberalism strategically employs the idea that global trade (like 'global culture'), is equally good for everyone. This precept has allowed economics to assume the power role once occupied by politics as the central discourse of our globalised age.

Once politics is 'naturalised', according to the 'neutral' imperatives enabling increased flows of transnational capital, cultural values shift radically as well. Just as world politics, dominated by global capitalism at its barest has resulted in diplomacy of the basest, so too regressive cultural notions like 'universal humanism' and 'benevolent paternalism', frequently reappear in un-self-conscious, a-critical guises. Anyway, surely once the centre has vanished and colonialism with it, the possibility of producing contemporary colonialist work is impossible, or is it? Take for example the veteran British artist Antony Gormley's installation *Asian Field* (2003), at Pier 2/3. Here the artist's thousands of miniature figures recede as though to infinity in an otherwise empty warehouse space. The figures, we are informed, are the product of the work of five hundred assistants from Xiangshan village, Guangzhou, in China, who manufactured them from local clay in 2003. Also accompanying the figures are black and white portraits of the individual workers who co-produced this sublime spectacle to Gormley's orders. Paradoxically, these coy documentary photographs reveal absolutely nothing about the actual lives or living conditions of the people they depict. Instead, the photographs function separately as masks or rather, as 'signs' for 'humans' or for humanity in general and overall as an afterthought to a contemporary clichéd sculptural version of the *Family of Man*.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the work is oppressively homogenising in its affect, particularly as the makers' identities have been so thoroughly subsumed by the identical, anonymous figurines that Gormley has stated he wishes to implant in every continent, where one imagines, they will continue to look exactly the same. In this instance, the concept of transnational cultural co-operation functions likewise as a mask as Gormley retains his absolute role as sole author. The colonising impulse underlying this work actually emulates the principles of contemporary transnational capitalism, where a corporation steps into a

'third world' nation in order to have its products cheaply manufactured for overseas markets. Obviously, the blatant mercantilism of such a transaction is mainly absent from Gormley's work. Still, its convenient use of marginalised 'others' is virtually identical, only now it reads as poetic and benignly humanist. Despite this, and perhaps even despite Gormley's intentions, his work sets up a classic master-slave dichotomy perfect for an age in which a new feudal divide has opened further dividing classes.

Issues of collectivity inform other works in *Zones of Contact*. One such work, also sited at Pier 2/3, and also relating to China's present global identity, is the collectively produced installation by Beijing based artist Cao Fei and unidentified employees and workers from the Osram China Lighting company in Foshan, China. Deliberately naïve in appearance the work mimics a traditional Chinese rural village replete with worker's hut (with obligatory image of Chairman Mao), stoves, chairs and table, a well with bucket and a picturesque Chinese landscape painting. This entire setting has been constructed from Osram lightglobe containers. The installation with its title, *What Are You Doing Here?—Future* (2006), speaks immediately of the displacement of traditional modes of existence, or at least of the enforced transposition of older more organically communal modes of living, with a survivalist communality provoked by the advent of multinational investment in the region. Of course, traditional Chinese village life had already long been severely ruptured and irrevocably altered by Mao's bloody Cultural Revolution. In this work, despite its knowing irony, memories of the brutal collectivisation of that earlier period have simply been translated, even cheerfully, into the supposedly benevolent neutral contemporary language of corporate branding. In fact, the group, who co-authored this work apparently also stage their own factory plays, Communist style, while continuing to create other works of a similar ilk to this installation. Yet, regardless of the genuine liberation from wretched working conditions the worker's involvement in such activities may suggest, presentation of such work in the *Biennale* appears basically anthropological, a slice of a simpler life recovered intact from another, still exotic, global location. Such a critical reception is further upheld once the specific socio-cultural conditions eliciting the Osram workers collective activities have been removed and their 'amateur' productions rendered as contextually empty as the containers that compose it.

Citing examples of works like those mentioned; works that inadvertently or covertly reveal the machinations of globalised economies and their attendant enlivening of colonialist interventions, does not discount the presence of others that are fully aware of the iniquities of the contemporary global era. Dimitry Gutov's, *Thaw* (2006), is a dimly lit installation of claustrophobically suspended and charred ceiling boards, photographs and a digital video. The latter depicts what appears to be a homeless man or 'holy-wanderer' perpetually slipping on mud and permafrost. The work obliquely ruminates on the recent capitalist wasting of the ex-Soviet Union. In the Canadian artist Jayce Salloum's multi-screen video-works grouped under the title, *everything and nothing and other works from the ongoing series untitled 1988-2006*, an immigrant Palestinian woman speaks of her experience of detainment, isolation and torture by the Israeli military. During her monologue, the subject also reflects on the true value of objects. Ultimately, for the speaker this value is emotional; the few objects allowed in detention are insignificant in themselves, only their ability as a medium to commune with others, matters. In this way, the work is also an implicit critique of the strategically inflated

worth of the innumerable commodities and empty 'things' whose endless circulation legitimates the rampant materialism of the global neo-liberal ethos. At the Hyde Park Barracks, the Serbian artist Milica Tomic presents a bullet ridden shipping container entitled, *Container* (2004). The artist's work is a response to a reported event about USA-supervised Afghan troops machine-gunning a container of captured Taliban 'enemy combatants' after they complained of not being able to breath. Despite the descriptive parameters this story inscribes, the work resonates powerfully with additional metaphoric meanings.

At the Performance Space, Indian artist Shilpa Gupta explores the tensions surrounding the violently contested territory of Kashmir on the Indian/Pakistani border. The four sides of her container-like installation are inset with computer screens, whose interactive content conjures the fineline dividing the everyday from its potential eruption into chaos, war and death. Atlas Group/Walid Raad, elliptically explore the history of Lebanon's 1975–1991 civil war in a projected video, *We Can Make Rain but No One Came to Ask*, from 2005. Appearing almost as anonymous surveillance footage, the video recounts an incident of local urban terrorism in the form of a Beirut car bombing. At the time of writing, with Israel's military bombardment of Beirut and Lebanon, such work resounds with a disturbing sense of all too familiar tension.

Examples of this type of socially conscious and interrogative work abound in this year's *Biennale*. However, questioning whether such work is 'good' (and there are certainly a number of powerfully affecting works in the exhibition) or 'bad', becomes upon broader analysis, pointless. Despite attempts to remove or de-emphasise the narrow thematic dictates of the biennale format, *Zones of Contact* with its unspoken focus on global peripheries, ends up doubly disturbing for the wrong reasons. Confronted with the exhibition as a whole, even if efforts have been made to recognise the necessary impossibility and futility of attempting to adequately represent global culture, it is what is missing from the show that speaks most loudly about certain cultural assumptions underlying it. Many of the individually exhibited works originate in, or depict, geopolitical regions beset in recent history by horrendous violence and civil unrest including parts of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Numerous works from, or relating to these areas, are highly successful in eliciting empathy from the audience. Given the incomprehensible incidences of contemporary injustice in the contemporary world this, in itself, is obviously not a bad thing. What is more problematic though is the fact that the often-troubled vision that underscores *Zones of Contact* effectively exempts internal focus. That is to say, at no point does the visual and documentary evidence of the iniquities and symptomatic violence of the supposedly unstoppable machinations of neo-liberal globalisation referenced by these works, reflect negatively on the West's principal responsibility for them. This is because the West, of which Australia is a part, has symbolically absented itself from the Centre by conveniently representing it as empty, while actually maintaining its dominance there.

Again, this centre is empty only insofar as neo-liberal economics—as the dominant discourse of the global age—is able, unlike politics, to represent itself as neutral. Yet, when a powerful force like the USA invades a sovereign nation like Iraq, at least partially out of economic interest, it artificially creates a power vacuum that it then seeks to fill in the role of liberator. When the Australian coalition government excuses the mandatory detention of all asylum-seekers, it does so on

the grounds that it is protecting the 'Australian people' and by implication, the nation's hard won economic prosperity. Ironically, it is precisely this self-protective economic imperative, as a double signifier of contemporary Australia's cultural maturity and passage from past obscurity that enables it now to assume a power role as a connoisseur of the periphery. As a result and because of the contextual specificities of the exhibition's framing, the disturbing political content of much of the work in the 2006 *Biennale* is made to read as illustrative of generalised humanist woes. In this manner, the show suggests that if there are serious problems in our globalised world then thankfully, they lie somewhere else. Meanwhile, the structural violence enacted in representing otherness, common to the colonial imagination, remains intact.

Ultimately, if genuine contact is made with other cultures via this year's *Biennale*, it is largely in the spirit of a textbook humanism. For example, when audience members listen to a young woman's description of her experience of detention elsewhere, do local audiences imagine what it must be like for detainees in this country, in Woomera or Baxter, and more importantly, of their partial responsibility for this? Unfortunately, it seems unlikely. Finally, Australia's absenteeism from the global political collisions of *Zones of Contact*, testified too by the conspicuously relative lack of locally represented practitioners, is possibly best revealed in the display of the aboriginal artist, Djambawa Marawili's burial poles and bark paintings. These works, their author has emphasised, are not "pretty pictures" but legal documents of a frequently ignored native land title.<sup>3</sup> Their installation at Pier 2/3 however upholds a traditionally anthropological reading, the work appearing as a diorama of the authentic Australian desert moved indoors. What remains though is a serious unsolved and sidelined problem that strikes at the core of Australia's contemporary political and cultural identity. In the end, such problems are not the fault of the *Biennale's* director. Instead, they are much more broadly symptomatic of an increasingly globalised contemporary art scene. Within this expanded territory parcelled representations of the anguish, iniquity and injustice facing others, is generally preferred to efforts to expose or redress the specific global structural imbalances and cultural biases that produce such manifestations in the first place.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is precisely the attitude of core pro-globalisationists, especially the USA based Francis Fukuyama who conceptualises the fall of Communism, less as a result of its internal structural inconsistencies, but as ultimate proof of the natural superiority of Western neo-liberal capitalism. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992

<sup>2</sup> *The Family of Man* was an extremely popular (and eminently populist) exhibition of black and white photographs mounted by Edward J. Steichen in 1955 for the New York Museum of Modern Art. While offering infinitely diverse images of human beings living in the 1950s, it attempted nevertheless to emphasise to audiences that they were all part of the same big family. The notions underlying the exhibition have become a commonplace in countless other visual representations of humanist philosophies

<sup>3</sup> See Djambawa Marawili's artist's statement, where he writes; "I do not want to go to exhibitions and galleries and see people only looking at pretty pictures anymore. I want people to look at my paintings and recognise our law. It's all I can do." 2006 *Biennale of Sydney, Zones of Contact* handbook, *Biennale of Sydney*, 2006: 21