



catholic tastes
and tail-chasing

In an ideal world, there would be an online search engine devoted solely to art and visual culture. All manner of details about works in any medium, from any period of history, from any place on the planet would buzz away in its hive of data. At the mere tap of the Enter key, these data would rush from the deep recesses of digital code, flitting through phone lines and coursing through cables to settle as image and text on a screen. Type in “silence”, for example, and what might we find? An image of Marcel Marceau, perhaps, his hands raised in pantomime surprise, his face caked bright white. Beside it, a detail from Botticelli’s *Primavera* of the nymph Chloris chased by Zephyrus, her screams unfolding as flora, silenced. Alongside that, a statue of the monkey Iwazaru, his hands across his mouth so as to speak no evil. And somewhere in this curious mix would undoubtedly be John Cage’s 4’33” (image not available).

For artists, historians, critics and curators world-wide, this would be a godsend of a database. The pesky amounts of time spent chasing obscure works, or finding material to fit a theme, or teasing out art’s complex contextual histories—all that could be eradicated in a few quick strokes of the keyboard. Type in “square” and out would pour the dates, dimensions and imagery of all squares relevant to art: Malevich, Stella, Tiananmen, Red... “Cake” might plonk Marie Antoinette alongside Claes Oldenburg and paintings of the Boston Tea Party, while “forbidden” is simply begging for our computers to crash in a surfeit of data. This could be a risk worth taking though, for the database would be an extraordinary invention. Its agglomerations of histories, geographies, mediums and imagery would be far more radical than any existing approach we have that seeks to conjoin distant things and different thoughts in a single image archive. André Malraux’s *Musée Imaginaire*, Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* and Bill Gates’ *Corbis* would be superseded in one fell swoop, while distinctions between the form and content of art, or the places and times of its creation, could dissolve in the triumph of the keyword.

So what would we get, I wonder, if that keyword happened to be “revolution”? The answer is, perhaps, the curatorial aesthetic presented by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev at this year’s *Biennale of Sydney*, an aesthetic that unleashes extraordinary possibilities as well as the need to be judicious. The pivot of the keyword produces a decidedly catholic array of interpretations of what “revolution” may signify. References to specific socio-political events in history—the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Prague and Parisian uprisings in 1968, the so-called media revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989—co-exist with more formal invocations of the word—of circles, spheres and video loops; of circles and spheres within video loops; of works that hang from the ceiling and spin in the air; spirals in history; spirals in space; and lots and lots of wheels (bicycle and other). The conjunction, or at least the contiguity, of so many works by so many artists from different geographical and historical contexts raises a host of fascinating questions. What sparks might fly when Tommy McRae’s *Sketch of Squatters* (1864) hangs back-to-back with Bruce Nauman’s neon spiral, *The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths* (1967), as occurs in the Art Gallery of New South Wales? What dialogues might develop when Atsuko Tanaka’s bells (from 1955) ring out beside the pairing of Kasimir Malevich’s charts and drawings and Lia Perjovschi’s recent timelines of subjective art histories?

The response is—not much. Sparks and dialogues between artworks are, it seems, rarely Christov-Bakargiev’s interest here. Instead, her curatorial methodology appears to be driven by other concerns. One such concern is to transform the *Biennale* into a walk-in version of this magical, mythical database, with image reproductions replaced by the works themselves. This can induce wonderfully refreshing experiences—canonical works, especially from European art histories, are drawn into the frame of biennales and other mega-exhibitions, rupturing the normative churning of ever-new artists and artworks within the biennale merry-go-round.¹ The teacher in me equally recognises how invaluable that experience of seeing art’s canon in the flesh will be during the *Biennale*’s duration, especially given the range of Arte Povera and Russian Constructivist works, for example, that are rarely seen in this country. (The aura of an actual work, and of being in the presence of a work, has certainly not died with the rise of the internet, but exponentially increased, as Christov-Bakargiev knows well.)

At the same time, though, the *Biennale* occasionally veers toward a smorgasbord or hotchpotch display. Aside from a formal and not particularly informative engagement with rotations-as-revolutions, I seem to have missed the possible ties and tensions within the Art Gallery of New South Wales foyer, for instance. Is there a conceptual circulation between Nauman’s neon spiral, Ross Gibson’s dialogues with viewers surrounded by the spectres of history in the McRae sketch and Mick Kubarrku’s bark painting, Nedko Solakov’s employment of two people to paint and repaint the gallery walls in white and black rotations and James Angus’ sculpture of an overturned and anamorphosed car? When points of connection are explicitly suggested, they tend to be astonishingly literal in their formalism or disappointingly trite. The Museum of Contemporary Art, for example, hosts its own women’s room, filled with the drastically different photography of Tina Modotti and Rosemary Laing, as well as a sculpture by Julie Rrap that plays on Piero Manzoni’s image of *Le Socle du Monde*, or “the base of the world”, that is displayed across the gardens in Artspace.² Is the room a marker of the feminist revolutions of the twentieth-century? A gendered dislocation of practice to the rear gallery of the MCA’s third floor? A coincidence? In an adjacent wing, potentially revolutionary works are suspended from the ceiling. In one gallery, Rodchenko’s spatial constructions from the first years after the Bolshevik Revolution hang beside Maurizio Cattelan’s taxidermised horse, its forlorn drag by gravity, its puckered fur and its title *Novecento* (1997) alluding to the weight and failures of twentieth-century socio-political ambitions. In another room of the wing, Alexander Calder’s mobiles gently turn in space, alongside the more violent twists and circles danced by Olafur Eliasson’s *Light Ventilator Mobile* (2002). In other words, what we get is a room of hanging works that relate to socio-political revolutions; another room of hanging works that, well, revolve (sorry, chart their own revolutions); and lying in the room between them are a series of spheres and other round objects traced from the everyday by Simryn Gill and pooled in a circle on the floor.

For Christov-Bakargiev, this polysemous invocation of the term ‘revolution’ pinpoints her desire “to re-semanticise the word, through re-engaging the imaginary with its origins”.³ It could also be thought of as ‘google mulching’: type in the word and see what graces the screen. Yet, concurrent with the flow of these doubts in my mind, I also know that such slim pickings are far too slim for Christov-Bakargiev. Her past exhibitions and analyses of Arte Povera and William Kentridge have been thoughtful and even inspiring. The *Turin Triennale* that she co-curated with Francesco Bonami was similarly clever, confronting the greedy, gargantuan carnival of most mega-exhibitions with a Rabelaisian correlate called the “Pantagruel Syndrome”.⁴ The slightness and literalism involved in how the *Biennale*’s themes play out may thus be a decoy of sorts, as the curator has often proclaimed—and, in a certain sense, it is. As I mentioned earlier, her curatorial methodology is driven by other concerns, the most important of which would appear to be a kind of testing of art’s autonomy today. This isn’t an understanding of autonomy in the Greenbergian sense, of an artwork vacuum-sealed to the conditions of its medium, but autonomy in the sense of an artwork’s singularity, its “being *such as it is*” in the words of Giorgio Agamben.⁵ By placing these singularities in co-existence, one after the other, Christov-Bakargiev seems to have developed an Agamben-inspired curatorship, in which works are not bound by a common property or identity but operate in a shared communication of themselves as they are.

In Agamben’s theories, this co-existence of singularities brims with potentiality. It refuses to belong to a pre-determined set of identities—if something asserts its singularity, it asserts itself only as it is rather than how others might perceive it to be—and can thereby resist any interpretations or parameters that seek to contain it within what is already thought. For Agamben, these resistances and refusals together informed his own revolutionary community-to-come, or “the coming community” in his words, derived through the co-existence of these singular entities or what he called “whatever beings”.⁶ As a curatorial strategy, however, this feeling of ‘whatever’ seemed to come into play in a somewhat different way to that argued by Agamben. A series of singularities may be a tricky, clever and, yes, brave conceptual strategy, but it also tends to resemble a plonking of works together that have surprisingly little to say to each other. Raquel Ormella’s whiteboards (*feral animal office*), (2008) and Joseph Beuys’ blackboards



from his *Office for Direct Democracy* (1971) are certainly fascinating objects in themselves, for example; yet when they are set next to each other, as we find in the AGNSW, their witty relations become too obvious, even uninteresting, trapped within a space that becomes the exhibition's board-room.

What emerges from such correlations or the lack thereof, then, is a strange paradox. On the one hand, this is clearly a biennale about remembering, about history and about how history can intervene in and rupture the amnesic conditions of contemporary biennales (or even contemporary culture itself). By placing these singular works together in conglomerations, the effect is a sort of disruptive mimicry of how the contemporary flattens out time and space to be received in the omnipresent yet ever-obsolescent now. The *Biennale* presents a history of what our conditions of the contemporary are, in a way—a curiously catholic mixing induced by a database sensibility. On the other hand, however, the presentation of artworks as simply being in themselves, right here and right now, or connected through merely formal correlations, still has a tendency to level out and dissipate the works' historical specificities. Do we get a rigorous exploration of the relations and distinctions between Rodchenko's Russia and Cattelan's lament, or simply a series of forms that turn, a comfortable nihilism, in a fatigue of revolution today? Is there a teasing out of the complex tensions between Arte Povera and the Situationniste Internationale, or between the different revolutionary forces charging through Paris and Prague in 1968, or is this a grab-bag of historical moments conflated? To my mind, at least, many of the works don't seem to speak with each other, so much as stare at each other like a face-off in the mirror.

This is not *always* the case, of course. There are moments when the *Biennale* pulls out of such formal flattenings or overt 're-semanticisations' of 'revolution', and they are the moments when the exhibition soars to breathtaking heights and proves what a maverick sensitivity Christov-Bakargiev can have for her materials. The use of Cockatoo Island is a case in point, with the buildings and the pulsing, peeling histories of their walls creating an astonishing stage on which some of the *Biennale's* best works are set. It is, quite frankly, unbelievable that the island has not been used as a *Biennale* venue before, if only because of the anticipatory pleasures of the journey across the harbour to reach it. Once there, though, the buildings donate a formidable presence to the artworks they contain. Nowhere are these relations between art and its stage more resonant than in the superb mini-retrospective of Mike Parr's works in an entropic office building of its own.⁷ The often ghoulish remainders of his performances since the early 1970s, and their increasing opposition to the State into the early twenty first-century, chime perfectly with the stale and abandoned offices, their bureaucratic blight decaying into a perverse house of horrors. In other works, such as Clemens von Wedemeyer's stunning video *Ohne Titel (Rekonstruktion)* (2005), the nihilism evident elsewhere in the *Biennale* is ruptured by the brief sparks of energy rippling through a dancer's fingers as he gestures toward his performance. His head turns slowly, pauses, his neck pulsing with anticipation, before his body takes flight in movement. In *Pier 2/3*, Doreen Reid Nakamarra's own rippling painting is cast on the floor rather than bound to the wall. Not only does the horizontal display accord with the manner of its making, but the work's shimmer of country is allowed to sing in ways that wall-bound displays of Central Desert paintings often hint at yet, equally often, muffle. Hopefully, this will be a mode of display used in other exhibitions of Central Desert work. (The all-too-sad silencing of the adjacent *Intonarumori* by Luigi Russolo, the sculptures transformed into relics robbed of the potential they once contained, is not such a great precedent to follow, however.)

What I'm arguing then, is a mixed metaphor of sorts—this *Biennale* may be revolutionary in theme, but strangely up-and-down in effect. Many of the works presented are very fine indeed; the manner of their presentation can also be extraordinarily good—and also decidedly perplexing. Why, for example, would William Kentridge's projections be installed in the room above Shaun Gladwell's and Qiu Anxiong's videos, two of the *Biennale's* more contemplative works whose atmospherics are drowned out by the vaudeville soundscape clamouring from upon high? Is this a kind of curatorial sadism? A wilful test of each work's singularity and autonomy? Is it careless? As these questions suggest, there are some revolutions in operation here after all. They are revolutions within the mind of the viewer (or at least this viewer), seeking to find more from the display than what emerges

at face value, continually chasing initial doubts and responses with other questions and other possible responses, which are in turn chased by further questions and new doubts. This is the revolution of tail-chasing and it can be as frustrating as it is provisional. At the same time, however, this kind of unsettling on the viewer's part is also Christov-Bakargiev's intent, for she sees 'revolution' as ultimately an individual rather than a strictly social or formal pursuit.⁸ In that sense, the *Biennale* succeeds in its aims. It certainly ensures that viewers mull over its conceptual parameters, its purpose and its status as a curatorial decoy, with one doubt shadowing another, one question chasing another.

There is one serious doubt that remains unquestionable with this exhibition, though, and it is a doubt that I want to leave hanging in lieu of a conclusion to this text. What struck me in the venues, while reading the catalogue and in the few days since is that if *Revolutions—Forms that Turn* presents a database approach to curatorship, then it is a database with its 'safe search' fully switched on. This is due less to the high degree of canonical works on display than to whose canon is displayed. This is particularly significant given only two years have passed since Charles Merewether's vehemently political, post-postcolonial *Biennale* (an exhibition that has grown on me greatly during that period, I have to say, and that has proven many of my initial reservations wrong). I find it curious, for example, that there are precious few works from Asia, Africa, South and Latin America, let alone the Pacific. I find it intriguing that the main essayists for the catalogue are safely ensconced in London, New York and Rome. I find it surprising that, among all the revolutions thrown into the *Biennale's* heady mix, there is no reference to some of the most pressing revolutions of the past sixty years and their lingering effects today—to Iran in 1979, to Rhodesia in 1980, to China in 1949 or the Cultural Revolution after 1966. Which brings me to the final few questions in an essay brimming with doubt and giving the benefit of it—whose revolutions does Christov-Bakargiev think provide the history of the early twenty first-century? What does this say about an Australasian biennale in 2008? And finally, most importantly, does she really believe that the 'coming community' is still to be European?

Notes

¹ Christov-Bakargiev makes this point herself in an interview (conducted together with artist Michael Rakowitz) with Zanny Begg, 'Confusion, A Trip to the Dentist and the Biennale of Sydney: In Conversation with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Michael Rakowitz', *Broadsheet* Vol 37 No 2: 90-97; as well as in her catalogue essay for the *Biennale*: see Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, 'Revolutions Forms that Turn: The Impulse to Revolt', in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *2008 Biennale of Sydney: Revolutions—Forms that Turn*, Fishermans Bend: Thames & Hudson, 2008: 31

² Two further questions—to what extent is Manzoni's work included as a reference to Australia's position at the 'base of the world' as well? And is this yet another reflection of the world being 'upside-down', upended by the antipodes, revolved, for the curator?

³ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, 'Revolutions Forms that Turn: The Impulse to Revolt': 30

⁴ See for example, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), *Arte Povera*, London: Phaidon, 1999; Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev et al., *William Kentridge*, Milan: Skira and London: Thames & Hudson, 2004; Francesco Bonami and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (curators and eds.), *T1: The Pantagruel Syndrome*, Milan: Skira, 2006

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 1. For Christov-Bakargiev's reference to this text, see 'Revolutions Forms that Turn: The Impulse to Revolt': 33

⁶ Agamben, *ibid.*

⁷ This is not the first time that Christov-Bakargiev has presented a mini-retrospective within a large-scale group exhibition. In the first *Turin Triennale*, she and Bonami staged similar shows of the work of Takashi Murakami and Doris Salcedo

⁸ Christov-Bakargiev, 'Revolutions Forms that Turn: The Impulse to Revolt', *op. cit.*

This text was commissioned in conjunction with Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney, and will appear in *Column 2, 2008 Biennale of Sydney Critical Response Special Issue*, published by Artspace