

BANAL

This Adelaide Festival issue of *Broadsheet* has as its focus a study of the notion of the biennale or biennial [depending on what school you went to] – by looking at a regional plethora of bi- and triennials – in Sydney, Adelaide, Singapore, Hong Kong and Yokohama [due to timing we are not able to look at Shanghai, Taipei and Kwangju], and where Sydney and Adelaide are sited in the bigger picture. Consequently, this editorial looks closely at the surviving and loftily titled *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, and whether it lives up to its name.

The *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* was initiated in 1990 by the Art Gallery of South Australia at a time when the national arena included the popular and vigorous *Australian Perspecta*, the *Biennale of Sydney* [both in Sydney] and the nationally touring *Moet et Chandon Art Prize*. During the span of the 1990s, *Contemporas*, the *Seppelt Art Prize* and the *Melbourne Biennial* came and went; the *Moet* also disappeared. Amongst this debris, Brisbane's *Asia Pacific Triennale* was initiated in 1993 [it will appear again later this year], while Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art quietly strolled along with the finitely resourced and envisioned *Primavera*. In 2002, there remains only the Asia-Pacific focused *APT* [after some contemplation regarding its future], the *Biennale of Sydney* [under constant funding uncertainties] and the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* as events of a national scale.

The *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* was modelled on New York's *Whitney Biennial of American Art*, with a desire to be equal with the then *Australian Perspecta*, and "intended henceforth to be the AGSA's principal contribution to the *Adelaide Festival of Arts*". In fact, then Director of the AGSA, Daniel Thomas, further stated in his *ABAA* catalogue foreward that, "The Adelaide Biennials will be comparable with the Australian Perspecta" [my italics]. Thomas' 'instructions' to inaugural curator Mary Eagle were that "all regions and levels of Australia" be surveyed [my italics again], and that the resultant "visual/intellectual/emotional experience for the museum visitor" be paramount over that of the academic catalogue collector.

Since that visionary beginning, the *ABAA* has had a fractured history. 1992 curator Tim Morrell's prophetically titled *Unfamiliar Territory* has faded from memory along with most of its artists. In 1994, Festival Director Christopher Hunt, declaring a north-south timeline axis between Adelaide and South East/North East Asia for his Festival, selected John Barrett-Lennard, Alison Carroll and Doreen Mellor to curate *Adelaide Installations*, with Australian and Asian artists, sited in various CBD and parkland locations, and the empty Gerard+Goodman Building [as the AGSA was at that time being extended]. As the *ABAA* in its first two manifestations suffered from curatorial conservatism, and a lack of resources and exhibition space, *Adelaide Installations* was simply a ripper. All artworks were big, funky and intriguing. They were in the public face and not twee-ly placed in 'the museum'. They, and the *ABAA*, worked. In 1996 the *ABAA* went urban groove-hip hop-grunge, each artist having his/her own playlist, courtesy of Christopher Chapman. In 1998, co-curators Juliana Engberg and Ewen McDonald journeyed us through sacred and profane aspects of ordinary life with *All this and Heaven too*. As a cultural product the *ABAA* had developed marginally as it bounced around with its personalised envisionings, but always constricted by resources – money and space. By the time of *All this and Heaven too*, the

ABAA had survived *Perspecta*. And like *Perspecta*, which in its final death throws went overtly 'thematic' rather than remain a survey, the *ABAA* in 2000 went didactic. With its propensity for prophetic titling, it went back of beyond with *Beyond the Pale*, an exhibition of only indigenous artists – suddenly there were no artists from "all regions and levels of Australia". Now in 2002 we have a convergence not only of art with science, a curatorium with almost an equal number of artists, but an *ABAA* with an adjoining pay-as-you-enter general public construct – *The Encounter, 1802: Art of the Flinders and Baudin Voyages*. This is a continued strategy of the AGSA in that it biennially bisects its limited temporary exhibition space [the 1996 Biennial catalogue refers to it as "capacious"] with a general public focused user- pays extravaganza. Buy one, get one free!

To say the *ABAA* has been thematically constructed during its lifetime, as AGSA Director Ron Radford asserts in this issue, is debatable, as is "it was never intended to be a mere survey of current contemporary art in Australia and it was certainly always intended to do more than *Perspecta*...". Has it? The *ABAA* was initiated as a Whitney-style survey according to Thomas. All certainly have had their parameters as such, initially quite narrow. The first two from shyness. *Adelaide Installations'* construct of public and empty warehouse sitings was hardly a theme, nor was the selection of Asian artists. Chapman's untitled endeavour was responsive to "specific experiences of being", as he put it, representing a diversity of backgrounds and a variety of cultural and social issues. Back to a Whitney, sort of. But the fifth progeny, by Engberg and McDonald, started to show *ABAA's* new colours by taking on the theme of Robyn Archer's Festival – notions of "the sacred and profane". Following *Beyond the Pale's* exclusivity, *conVerge* is now overtly driven by the Festival's themes rather than by any originating concept. As such, *conVerge* is pure kowtow. It should be remembered that the last *Australian Perspectas* were similarly driven by theme, and where is it now? Whether the *ABAA* has achieved more than any *Australian Perspecta* is a moot point. When it first appeared, it had nowhere near the substance of *Perspecta*. Now that the latter has disappeared, where's the mode for comparison? As the national arena is now somewhat poverty-stricken with the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* being the only biennial exercise in Australian visual art, it now has a far greater potential to become a new *Perspecta* in terms of [real] importance to and representation of the visual arts, an event that might both capture the focus of the nation and encapsulate contemporary Australian art practice in all its forms. With the provision of greater resources, and a commitment to a real representation of contemporary visual art, the *ABAA* can command greater respect. Lately it is simply a theme show driven by the whims of a Festival Director. After all, the Biennial's catalogue Forwards continually state that the *ABAA* is "the Gallery's commitment to the work of contemporary visual artists throughout Australia today".

THE MIDAS TOUCH

The *Adelaide Festival 2002*, unlike any of its predecessors, has been the proverbial content goldmine for *Broadsheet*. The excavation continues. It is well known that ex-Director Peter Sellars, when he first arrived in Adelaide and announced his vision for the Festival, espoused his 'community, community'

dictum, stating that "there will be no visual arts program..." [refer *BS* issues 29/4, 30/1 and 30/2]. Contrary to Associate Director Amanda McDonald Crowley's response in this issue that "what we eschewed was the idea of artform specificity... the program was developed around ideas and concepts, not artforms", this act simply annulled the Long March that the visual arts community experienced from 1980 onwards in getting both the visual arts recognised as a meritorious component of future Festivals and inserting its accompanying talkfest *Artists Week* into the national perception as a valuable platform for informed critical debate concerning the role of visual arts in the greater socio-cultural realm. Despite community and personal approaches, the Sellars line was no visual arts program and no *Artists Week*. So the visual arts community nonetheless got down to business – the galleries, after some ineffectual communication with the Festival, went ahead with their own programs, while a group of artists and others via the community consultation process engineered an alternative to *Artists Week* in *elastic*, with a national call for support and input [history repeating itself]. Post Sellars' departure, with the new Director retaining his 'vision', the Festival Mk II absorbed into its official program the we've-done-it-anyway exhibitions of most major visual art galleries [at no cost to the Festival. In the past the Festival has either commissioned exhibitions and placed them with the galleries or financially assisted the galleries in having their exhibitions in the program], and took 'under its wing', *elastic*. Via this backdoor strategy the Festival now has a recognisable visual arts program, and a free talkfest as a smaller sibling to *conVerge*, the *ABAA's* symposium. And here is where, yet again, the wheels fall off the Festival wagon. The irony here, of course mightily disappointing, is that where *Artists Weeks* have been free and potentially embracing of the community, the *conVerge* symposium has been 'priced' at \$200 for arts and science industry professionals, with a sliding scale down to one day registration [and limited seats] for the unemployed, pensioners and students at \$60! [In 1996 those responsible for *Artists Week's* *Compost* imposed attendance charges, with a resulting arts community exodus, both in physical presence and appreciation]. Artists are *not* listed in the Festival's scale of 'prices'. One could assume therefore that they are full-tote-odds paying industry professionals. The reader will see that the *Broadsheet's* query that these 'prices', "seemingly disenfranchises the very community that it seeks to embrace...", hasn't really been answered, nor was it when clarification was sought from Festival Director Sue Natrass prior to publication. This is simply disappointing, as the range of registration fees from \$60 to \$200 really does fly in the face of everything achieved by free *Artists Weeks* from 1980-2000.

The presence in the Festival program of this Australia Council funded symposium for which the arts community – artists and art students – are required to pay, at such unheard of charges, to listen to what they might have heard at an *Artists Week* for free, begs the question, whom and what is this funding supporting?

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